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- OUTDOOR LIVING
- STRUCTURAL PROJECTS
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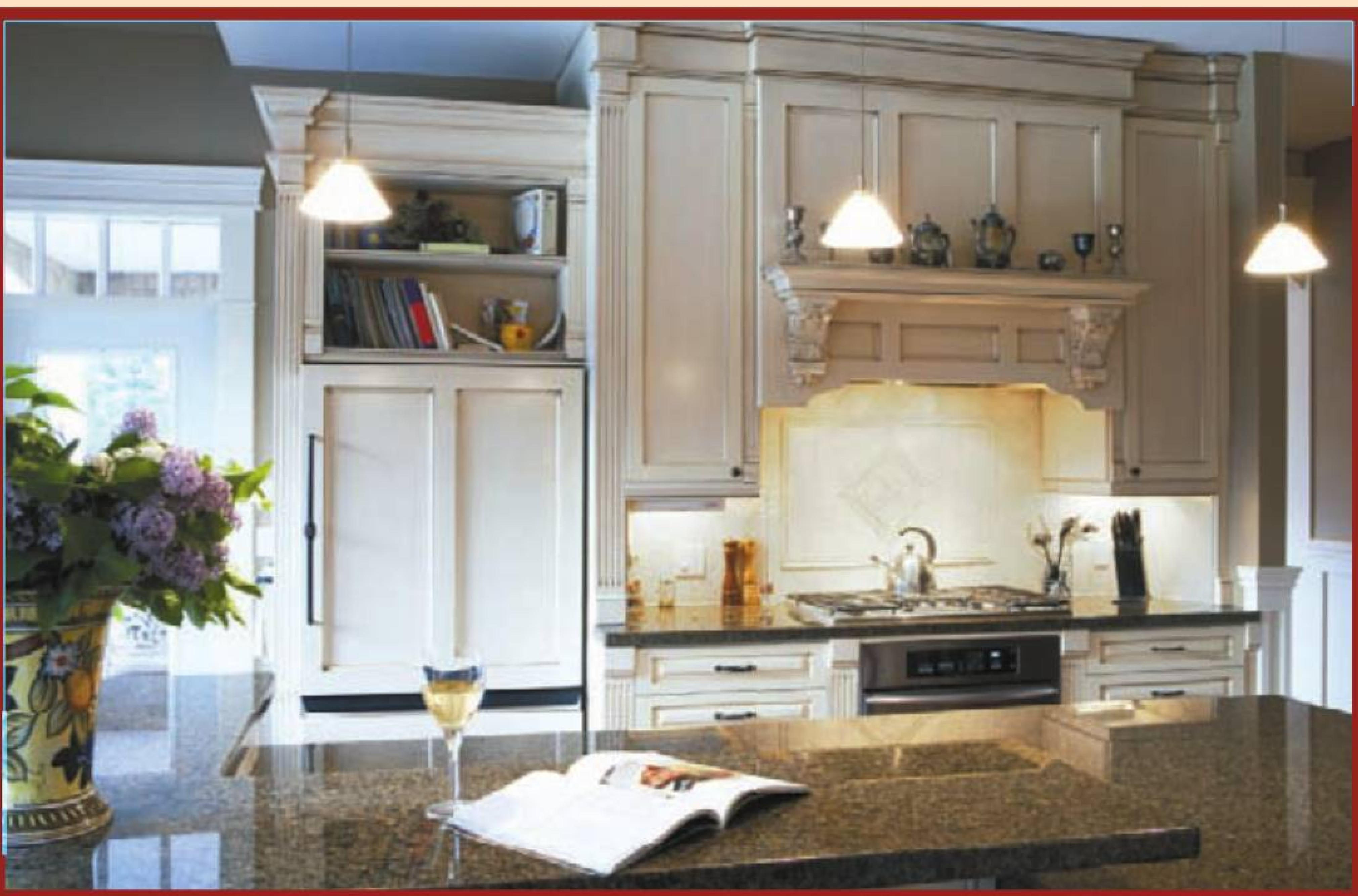

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COVER PHOTO: PAUL CHMIELOWIEC.

Home Improvement

Home renovation has long been a dream of yours: You've kept cut-outs from your favourite magazines, jotted down inspiring ideas and combed the stores to check out the latest trends. Now, the time has finally come to execute your long-awaited home improvement plan! Soon you'll have that ultra-modern bathroom, warm and functional kitchen or inviting terrace complete with spanking-new hot tub – or your plan might simply be to refresh a room with a paintbrush and new curtains.

Until you get started, though, and regardless of the scope of your renovation plans, there will be a great many details to iron out, from choosing experts and materials to defining your needs. To help you plan and guide you through the decision-making process, STYLE AT HOME and YELLOW PAGES GROUP present this fourth edition of *Home Improvement*, which combines a magazine with a directory of resources.

Find what you need online at improvemyhome.ca

The first part of this practical guide is chock full of information, tips and inspired ideas meant to help you make informed decisions, prevent costly mistakes and become familiar with the newest trends. The second part, "Find a Business," is a directory of relevant businesses serving the Greater Toronto Area. You'll find suppliers of products and services that can help you make your project a reality.

For easy consultation, these two sections are divided into four categories, each identified by a different band of colour. Consult the table of contents on the next page for all the subjects that we are sure will be of interest to you. To locate a particular company, see the table of contents in the YELLOW PAGES™ section, after the divider sheet.

Keep this special edition handy until the next edition, scheduled for release in the spring of 2010. *Home Improvement* is sure to become an essential reference guide for all of your home renovation projects, big and small. Happy renovations!

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What's New in the Kitchen?

Less is becoming the new more. The over-the-top, lavishly designed kitchen of a few years ago has undergone a weight-reduction program for 2009.

BY **MARTHA UNIACKE BREEN**

Simple, graphic design is the new chic in kitchens for 2009, with low-key, neutral-toned materials such as marble, stainless steel, leather and dark-stained wood.

PHOTO: PAUL CHMIELOWIEC.

Pared-down design gives the kitchen of 2009 an efficient, almost laboratory feel. Prologue sink and Evoke faucet by Kohler.

Consumers today don't want a lot of conspicuous consumption in their kitchen designs; less is the new more. Even in traditional homes, intelligent, efficient design – and the beauty of simple functionality – is what interests us now. Part of this comes from a growing environmental consciousness: Consumers are becoming steadily more aware of not only the importance of doing more with less but also considering the entire life of a product, from the raw materials through the manufacturing process to final disposal at the end of its useful life.

In keeping with this new, less pretentious lifestyle, design is becoming simpler, more graphic. Whether it's textures and materials from nature or simple, bold statements in shape and clear colour, simple and functional have never been more chic. Form truly follows function in 2009.

Above: Reflective surfaces such as ceramic walls and high gloss counters add polish.
Below: Intelligent storage maximizes efficiency.

DESIGN ELEMENTS

- **Rustic chic** – natural materials and colours (like stone, wood, light greys, white, pale greens and yellows); more obvious wood graining; rough-hewn-looking stones such as slate, soapstone or honed stone finishes.
- **Electric-bright colours** – strong statements in bold primaries, often used in one element or as an accent (like a red wall); also, bright cabinets and/or countertops, especially in yellow or orange.
- **Reflective, high-gloss surfaces** – already a hit in Europe, in colour, black or white or metals such as stainless steel; mirror, glass (including glass mosaic) or high-gloss finishes.
- **Monochromatic design** – especially all-white or all-black.
- **Cleaner, simpler lines** – even in traditional styles; the heavy, over-the-top mouldings of years past are being toned down.
- **Built-in appliances** – a 30-inch deep fridge can be integrated with a 24-inch counter depth by actually recessing it into the wall behind, maximizing storage capacity without interrupting the flow of a counter or jutting into the room; it can then be finished with a cabinet front or embellished with furniture elements.

PHOTOS: IKEA CANADA.

Left: Clean, bold lines make a statement in this kitchen by Fellini Designs.
Below: This versatile faucet by Robinet features a high, adjustable gooseneck design with spray head.

PHOTO: KEN DYCK (FAUCET).

■ **Enviro-chic** – good looks are not enough these days! The kitchen must be environmentally friendly at all stages of its creation – from the choice of materials and manufacturing processes to its functionality and efficiency to all the appliances.

CABINETRY

■ **Contrasting uppers and lowers** – continue to be a strong look, especially lighter uppers with darker lowers, or contrasting materials.
■ **Glass-front uppers** – whether plain, frosted or etched.
■ **Highly realistic-looking laminates** – emulate solid wood cabinetry without the cost or weight, yet are just as or more durable than their solid equivalents.
■ **Storage** – not only ample but efficient and intelligent; lower drawers can be configured to hold plates and bowls, allowing you to bend rather than reach up to access them; slide-out panels maximize space. (Kitchen companies are coming up with ever-more-dedicated interior fittings to allow you to keep frequently used items near where they are used, while less-used items can be stored out of the way.)

COUNTERTOPS

■ **Contrast satin-finish countertops** – with high-sheen cabinets or other elements.
■ **Mixing multiple surfaces** – a butcher block or marble island with main counters of granite or solid surfacing, or insets in butcher block, marble or stainless steel.
■ **Thicker countertops** – or at least the illusion of them, using an apron on the edge that gives the impression of a thicker slab; sometimes used as a variation on standard-width counters, such as a four-inch-thick counter on an island.

FAUCETS AND HARDWARE

■ **Minimalist in style** – often with hidden handles or small-scale stainless steel rods, or interesting and chunky.
■ **High-style faucets** – seen as the jewellery of the kitchen; often chosen to coordinate not just with door hardware but with appliances and other elements.
■ **High-tech functions** – such as hands-free or one-touch; convenient if you need to turn on the faucet when your hands are full.
■ **Increased pressure** while using less water.

■ **SINKS**

■ **High-tech centres** – sinks with integrated stainless steel counters on either side are large enough to act as built-in drainboards, work surfaces or to perform tasks such as defrosting a steak.

■ **Accessories for sink centres** – built-in cutting boards that double as extended work surfaces and wire racks.

■ **Apron-front sinks** – still popular in country or traditional looks, whether in fireclay or given a modern update in stainless steel.

■ **LIGHTING**

■ **Energy efficiency** – as important as illumination or style.

■ **Multiple light sources** – task, overhead and accent; allow you to customize the lighting level for the task at hand.

■ **Dimmers** – for all the light sources in the room, now *de rigueur* for both energy savings and mood.

■ **Advances in technology** – will make incandescent, and soon even halogen, a thing of the past; LEDs, though limited in light output individually, can be used in multiples to provide a clean, white light in task areas, such as under the upper cabinets or as accent lighting inside glass-front cabinets (where their cool-burning quality makes them very safe to use).

■ **Chandeliers** – add an elegant touch overhead, especially if fitted with new dimmable CFL bulbs.

■ **FLOORING**

■ **Natural, sustainable materials** – such as bamboo, which grows so fast that it is considered a renewable resource, or cork, which does not harm the tree when harvested.

■ Where hardwoods (and other woods) are used, a new commitment to **sustainable harvesting** and manufacturing, from forest to floor; consumers are asking questions and educating themselves.

■ **Radiant heat** – especially under "cold" floors, such as stone or porcelain tile; comfortable underfoot and can actually reduce your home's overall heating costs.

■ **HIGH-TECH**

■ The kitchen is becoming by far the most technically advanced room in the house, from appliances with built-in computers that can be programmed to store and integrate all kinds of information to built-in TVs, computers, music and entertainment units or "smart" house controls for such things as temperature, humidity levels and lighting.

■ **ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

■ **Energy-efficient appliances** – even compared to just a few years ago, providing more and better features.

■ **Smaller appliances** – with the capacity and/or efficiency of larger units: water-saving dishwashers, induction cooktops, fridge and cooking drawers, dual convection/microwave ovens.

■ **Lighting technologies** – LEDs replacing incandescents and halogens, while providing more focused, brighter light.

■ **State-of-the-art manufacturing methods** – consider sustainability from raw materials to the finished kitchen, (through fair-trade sourcing and labour, reduced or reusable packaging, sound manufacturing methods and/or reduced waste).

■ **Environmentally friendly paints, glues and varnishes** that reduce outgassing and other chemical-based hazards. ☐

Our thanks to Binns Designer Kitchens and Baths, Pickering, Ont.; IKEA Canada; Masco Canada, Mississauga, Ont.; and KitchenAid Canada.

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PHOTO: IKEA CANADA.

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Appliance Update

Appliances have come a long way since the days of the wringer washer. Here are some of the latest trends for 2009.

BY **MARTHA UNIACKE BREEN**

Built-in appliances create a clean, streamlined look.

PHOTO: MARIO DUBREUIL

High-tech, "smart" appliances use electronics both for a more efficient operation and to perform functions unheard of only a few years ago: fridges that make dinner suggestions or tell you what you're out of; ovens and dishwashers that can be programmed to come on at a time that's convenient for you; built-in computers, televisions, MPG player docks and many other, now almost routine high-tech functions.

At the same time, simpler values are being reflected in appliance design, like the desire for fresher food, simpler and healthier cooking methods and lower energy use. And quality, even in mid-priced appliances, has never been higher. Here's a survey of some of the newest bells and whistles out there.

OVERALL

Stainless steel is king for a reason: Not only is it chic and sophisticated but it also goes with almost any kitchen style and won't go out of date any time soon. It is also hygienic and durable.

At least one company, Jenn-Air, has brought out "oiled bronze" to give stainless a run for its money. It evokes a beautiful, warm tone, especially in a suite of appliances.

Small appliances are equally high-tech: Mixers, food processors and coffee makers (as well as espresso and cappuccino makers) are all being made to high standards but are coming down in price.

■ REFRIGERATORS

As enthusiasm for bottled water fades, built-in water filters are taking off: The most sophisticated ones can filter out contaminants as well as chlorine and sediment.

The newest SubZero units feature air purification that "scrubs" interior fridge air every 20 minutes or so, eliminating odours, viruses and bacteria, as well as gases that can hasten food spoilage.

Right: **The Miele built-in coffee system lets you indulge in a European-style coffee, espresso, cappuccino or latte at the push of a button.**

Below: **The Sub-Zero new premium built-in refrigerator features a seamless look, multiple design options and its renowned freshness preservation system.**

■ OVENS, COOKTOPS AND RANGES

Steam ovens are leading the way in the newest healthy, energy-efficient methods of cooking, sealing in nutrients and flavour and cooking quickly.

LG built-in cooktops and wall ovens contain a touch screen that provides a wealth of information – such as a recipe bank – and can often be programmed to automatically set the oven temperature.

Induction cooking is the newest energy-saving technology, especially safe on a built-in island or counter since the cooktop quickly heats pots but stays cool to the touch.

Some conventional radiant-heat cooktops now offer constant heat rather than cycling on and off, for more even cooking.

Oven drawers, like fridge drawers introduced a few years ago, provide a convenient under-drawer position for an island or beneath a regular wall oven.

Space-saving double-wall ovens feature two separate ovens in the space of one.

1. KitchenAid induction cooktops heat foods quickly but remain cool to the touch.
2. and 3. Dishwasher drawers, like these from KitchenAid, add multiple design options and the versatility to allow you to run each drawer separately.
4. The GE Smart Dispense feature will automatically sense the soil level of the dishes and use only the amount of pre-filled detergent needed.

MICROWAVES

Some microwaves include a convection setting, for even cooking and browning, but without the energy consumption of a full-sized oven.

Another type features a radiant-heat lamp for warming foods safely for up to 90 minutes.

DISHWASHERS

At last, time-delay start makes real sense: As many municipal electric utilities move to graduated electricity use, you can set the dishwasher to run late at night when rates are cheaper.

Extra-capacity units can wash up to 16 place settings in the same space as a conventional 12-place unit, with larger tubs and stronger spray motors.

Sensor units test water cleanliness and adjust to provide only as much water and cleaning time as needed.

The GE SmartDispense unit can be filled once every two months or so with liquid detergent and dispenses exactly the right amount based on water hardness, level of dirt on dishes and the cycle you choose. GE also recently introduced a clothes washer with the same feature.

High-power scrubbing units use multiple power jets to eliminate prescrubbing to avoid wasting water. □

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Ten Tips for the Ergonomic Kitchen

To be ergonomic is to try to avoid needless or harmful movements. Here are some things you should think about before you begin renovating your kitchen.

BY **MARIE-CHRISTINE TREMBLAY**

1

After reassessing the configuration of your kitchen to make meal preparation more pleasant and effective, identify those areas you dislike (for example: not enough counter space near the stove or disorderly cupboards). A well-thought-out kitchen can make a huge difference.

1 For floor-level storage space, opt for drawers rather than cupboards. This way, you won't need to bend over to look for whatever is stuck at the back of a cupboard.

2 Store frequently used accessories in the top drawers just beneath the counter or on the bottom shelf of the cupboards just above the counter. The remaining accessories can then be stored based on how often they're used, with those used least often on the highest or lowest levels.

3 Make sure that your kitchen plan includes a working counter near the stove for dishes waiting to be cooked or those fresh out of the oven.

4 Install your range in such a way that you have ample space on both sides. A range placed at an angle, for example, will not give you the required space, and chances are you won't be at ease when cooking.

5 Provide for counter space close to the sink.

6 Working counters should be a minimum height of 90 centimetres. If you're shorter or taller than average, don't hesitate to adapt the counter height accordingly.

7 Provide sufficient lighting for each work area.

8 Make sure the range hood is at least 60 centimetres high so that you won't bump your head.

9 If you're left-handed, set up the appliances accordingly: Place the dishwasher to the left instead of to the right of the sink.

10 Keep a stool handy so that you can carry out certain tasks from a seated position. □

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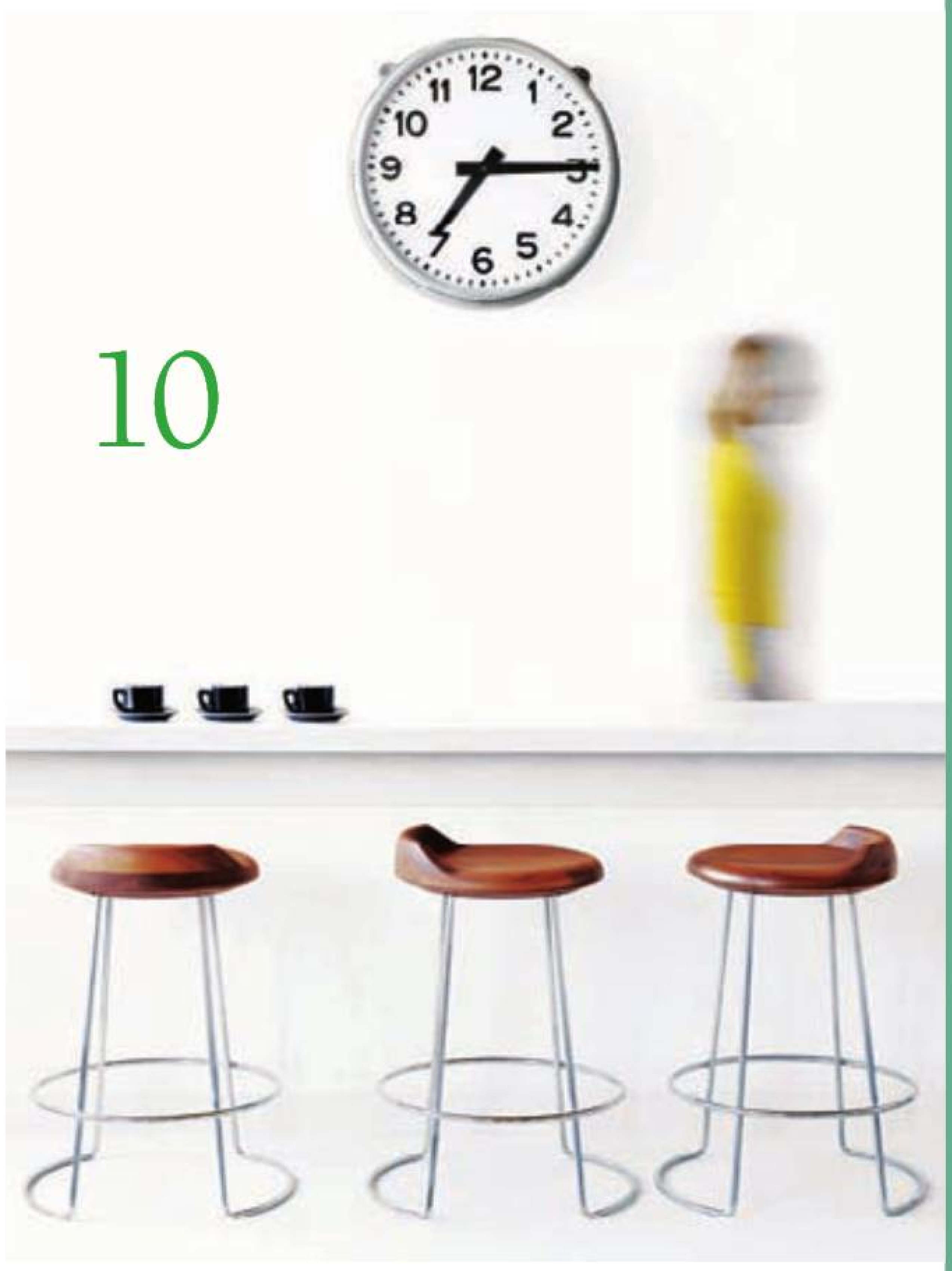


Two birds with one stone: These stools from McGuire are both practical and attractive.

PHOTOS: NINA TEIXEIRA (1, 8, 4).

Countertops Exposed

Finding the perfect countertop is easier than you think. Whether you're looking for affordability, function or style, today's market is full of options. To help you make the right choice, we took a look at the wide range of materials available.

BY **CLARE DOUGLAS**

BUTCHER BLOCK

ECO-ALERT! Always look for the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) symbol, which certifies that the product comes from a forest managed in an environmentally and socially responsible manner

Pros

- Can be moderately priced
- Scratches can be removed by sanding

Cons

- Somewhat resistant to heat and water
- Vulnerable to fire and burns

Maintenance

- Wash with damp cloth and mild dish detergent
- Treat regularly with mineral oil
- Don't varnish and avoid vegetable oil, which leaves a sticky residue

Cost (installed)

- $65+ per square foot

SOAPSTONE

Pros

- Visually rich-looking
- Smooth touch and finish
- Highly resistant to heat and stains

Cons

- High maintenance
- Vulnerable to cracks, which can't be fixed
- Can be expensive

Maintenance

- Coat with mineral oil once a month to preserve colour
- Wash with damp cloth and mild dish detergent
- Small scratches can be removed through sanding

Cost (installed)

- $60–$100 per square foot

LAMINATE

Pros

- Variety of colours and styles
- DIY option
- Affordable
- Easy to maintain

Cons

- Vulnerable to heat and stains as well as burns and scratches

Maintenance

- Wash with damp cotton cloth and mild dish detergent
- Use trivets to avoid heat damage

Cost (installed)

- $15–$30 per square foot

CONCRETE

Pros

- Colour-customization available
- Very durable
- Resistant to heat

Cons

- Requires annual resealing
- Heavy
- Can crack
- Vulnerable to stains
- Expensive

Maintenance

- Wash with damp cloth and mild dish detergent
- Clean up spills immediately to avoid staining

Cost (installed)

- $70+ per square foot

THE BACKSPLASH

For a uniform effect, the same materials used for the counters can be used for the backsplash (the area of the wall between the back edge of the counter and the cupboards above). For a contrasting effect, you can paint your own mural – if you're good with a paintbrush – or apply a faux finish with a coat of polyurethane. If you opt for ceramic tiles, always install them working upwards from the counter. A trick is to place the first row of tiles on spacer bars to maintain an equal space between the counter and the backsplash. – Isabelle Bergeron

PHOTO: JOE OLIVEIRA (OPPOSITE PAGE).

Red lacquer, dark wood, Corian surfaces and stainless steel create an environment that is both joyful and elegant.

THE WARRANTY

Regardless of how much you pay for your counters, carefully read the terms and conditions of the warranty, as they can vary widely from one retailer to the next. That said, remember that you are covered at all times by a legal warranty requiring that your product last a reasonable amount of time, based on its cost and the conditions under which it is used. – Isabelle Bergeron

Ceramic tile counters lend a country feel that works in harmony with the environment.

DO-IT-YOURSELF OR DEFER TO AN EXPERT?

Laminate and ceramic counters are the only types that do-it-yourselfers should install, provided that they're good with their hands and have the required patience.

■ Laminate. Available in lengths ranging from 1.2 to 4 metres (4, 6, 8, 10 and 12 feet), these pre-moulded counters are designed to be installed above cupboards measuring about 0.6 metres (24 inches) in depth. In general, they include a backsplash extending a few centimetres above the back wall. To measure the surface area covered, calculate the distance between the wall and the edge farthest from it, adding 25 millimetres (one inch) on the sides if they're going to be exposed. Where the two surfaces meet at a 90-degree angle, add 25 millimetres (one inch) on the sides and six millimetres (1/4 inch) to account for the angle. If you're concerned about making a mistake, some manufacturers and retailers offer a measurement-taking service. (But fees do apply.) ■ Ceramic. Take the exact measurements of the surface to cover. Based on these, the retailer will know how many tiles to cut. And be sure to use epoxy grout, which is more resistant to stains and dirt. – Isabelle Bergeron

PHOTO: MARIO DUBREUIL.

SOLID SURFACING (Corian)

Pros
▪ Huge selection of colours and styles ▪ Durable ▪ Low maintenance ▪ Resistant to heat, stains and dents

Cons
▪ Any abrasions require professional care ▪ Can be expensive

Maintenance
▪ Gently sponge using a mild abrasive liquid cleaner ▪ Wash with damp cloth; towel dry

Cost (installed)
▪ $50–$100 per square foot

CERAMIC TILE

Pros
▪ Large variety of colours and styles ▪ Highly resistant to heat and moisture ▪ Affordable

Cons
▪ Vulnerable to cracks and chips ▪ Tiles take time to install and set ▪ Grout can accumulate dirt

Maintenance
▪ Wash with damp cloth and mild dish detergent ▪ Use epoxy on grout to prevent staining

Cost (installed)
▪ $20–$70 per square foot

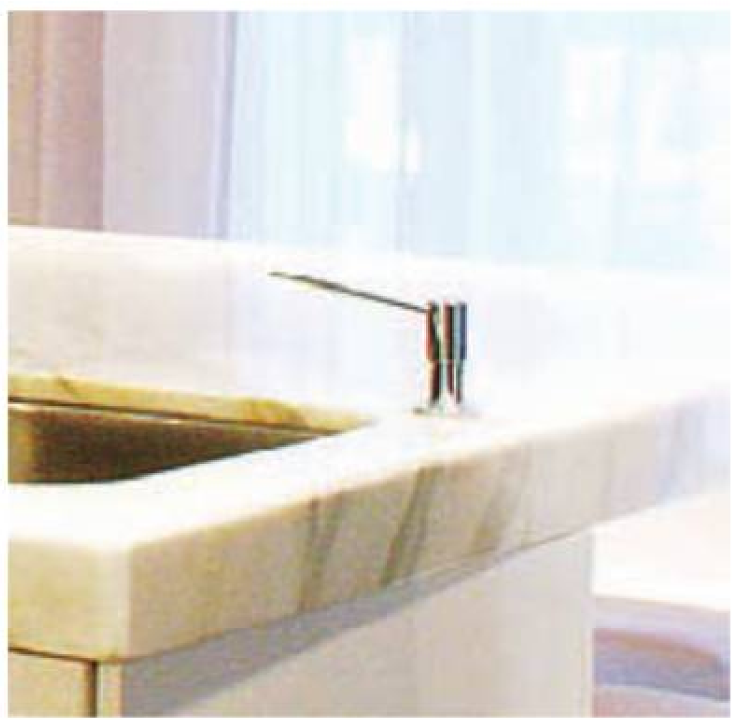
PAPERSTONE
ECO-ALERT! Manufactured from 100-percent post-consumer recycled paper.

Pros
▪ Wide range of colours available ▪ Harder than wood ▪ Resistant to heat, stains and scratches

Cons
▪ Colour can lighten over time with UV exposure ▪ Very expensive

Maintenance
▪ Requires semi-annual sealing with PaperStone Finish (contains 100-percent food-safe ingredients)

Cost (installed)
▪ $190+ per linear foot



MARBLE

Pros
▪ Attractive look ▪ Highly resistant to heat and water

Cons
▪ Requires semi-annual resealing ▪ Vulnerable to scratches and stains ▪ Expensive

Maintenance
▪ Wash with lukewarm water ▪ For polished finish, use marble polish semi-annually to maintain shine ▪ To create honed finish, apply a clear silicone-based sealer

Cost (installed)
▪ $70+ per square foot

ENGINEERED STONE (Zodiaq, Silestone)

Pros
▪ Smooth finish ▪ Hygienic ▪ Low maintenance ▪ Durable ▪ No sealants or waxes required ▪ Resistant to stains, heat and bacteria

Cons
▪ Doesn't look as rich as marble or granite ▪ Abrasions need professional care ▪ Can be expensive

Maintenance
▪ Wash with damp cloth and, if necessary, non-bleach, non-abrasive cleanser ▪ Clean up spills immediately to prevent staining

Cost (installed)
▪ $60–$100 per square foot

Note: Prices are guidelines only.

STAINLESS STEEL
ECO-ALERT! Stainless steel is the most recycled material in Canada. Chances are your new countertop is constructed out of recycled steel.

Pros
▪ Very durable ▪ Hygienic ▪ Low maintenance ▪ Simple buffing can help keep up appearance ▪ Resistant to heat and rust

Cons
▪ Vulnerable to dents and marks (especially fingerprints) ▪ Can be expensive ▪ Can be noisy when working on unless wood is used as reinforcement during installation

Maintenance
▪ When washing, wipe with grain ▪ Avoid bleach, which stains ▪ Mild abrasive powder can be used

Cost (installed)
▪ $60+ per square foot

ICESTONE
ECO-ALERT! Manufactured from 100-percent recycled glass.

Pros
▪ Offers more colour-customization options than granite ▪ Stronger than marble ▪ Resistant to heat and scratches

Cons
▪ Can stain if not properly maintained ▪ Expensive

Maintenance
▪ Wash daily with mild soap and water ▪ Avoid ammonia- and bleach-based cleaners

Cost (installed)
▪ $120 per square foot

GRANITE

Pros
▪ Wide selection of colours available ▪ Aesthetically pleasing ▪ Very durable ▪ Resistant to heat, water and stains

Cons
▪ Requires regular maintenance ▪ Can be expensive

Maintenance
▪ Dust twice a week with soft cloth ▪ Requires annual resealing ▪ Cleaning products containing acid or alkaline can strip stone polish

Cost (installed)
▪ $60+ per square foot

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Fabulous Floors

An increasingly diverse range of flooring materials is available these days. To help you sort through the options, here's the lowdown on the main products out there.

CAREFULLY READ THE GUARANTEE

Does your guarantee cover defects related to the manufacturing, finish and installation of flooring? See to it that it does. Note that many manufacturers and retailers offer coverage valid for as long as the purchaser owns the premises. Check to see that you have that kind of guarantee. As well, carefully read the exclusion clauses in the contract: Damages attributable to inadequately maintained or protected products are usually not covered.
– Isabelle Bergeron

VINYL

Characteristics
Huge selection of styles and colours. Available in tiles or sheets.

Pros
Low price, low maintenance. Double-thick vinyl is ideal for damp areas like bathrooms. Tiles are easy to DIY if the subfloor is level.

Cons
Vulnerable to scratches, tears, stains and wear.

Cost
$2-$10 per square foot

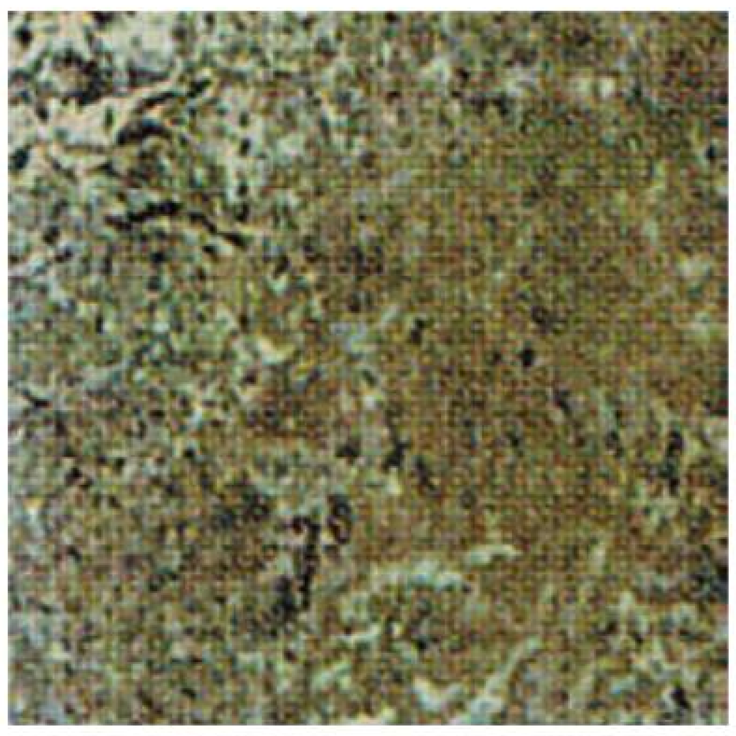
CERAMIC TILE

Characteristics
Huge selection of colours, styles and sizes.

Pros
Can easily be coordinated to tile backsplash.

Cons
Can cause discomfort to legs and back after prolonged standing. Not all tiles are equally wear-resistant; high-traffic areas like kitchens call for stronger ceramic. Can crack or chip. Needs a level subfloor.

Cost
$7-$25 per square foot



LINOLEUM

Characteristics
Huge selection of styles and colours. Available in tiles or sheets.

Pros
Natural, biodegradable and hypoallergenic, composed of flax and natural resin. Does not trap dust or bacteria, which helps air quality. Low maintenance, durable and mildew-resistant.

Cons
Does not suit all decors.

Cost
$7-$13 per square foot.

INSTALLATION

Poor installation may shorten the lifespan of flooring by several years. If you have a fairly good idea of the work involved and a measure of know-how, you'll likely be able to install ceramic or stone tiles yourself. By taking the measurements of the surface area covered (once you've drawn up a rough plan of your kitchen) and consulting a professional on the steps to follow, you'll no doubt achieve good results. However, if you opt for vinyl or linoleum, hiring a professional is highly recommended. This kind of work requires levelling the surface area perfectly (especially when you're working with cement); the slightest imperfection is liable to limit the durability of the flooring, due, for example, to warping. – Isabelle Bergeron

PORCELAIN TILE

Characteristics
The look of stone, for less! Huge selection of colours and designs.

Pros
Stronger than ceramic; durable and low maintenance.

Cons
Can cause discomfort to legs and back after prolonged standing.

Cost
$8-$28 per square foot

LAMINATE

Characteristics
Great selection of styles and colours. Looks like wood, stone, ceramic.

Pros
Resists stains, scratches, dents, even cigarette burns. Relatively easy to DIY, often directly on top of existing floor. Click-into-place styles can simply be dismantled and taken with you when you move. Good-quality laminate can last up to 25 years.

Cons
Not recommended for bathrooms or other damp areas. Must be replaced when worn.

Cost
$3-$11 per square foot

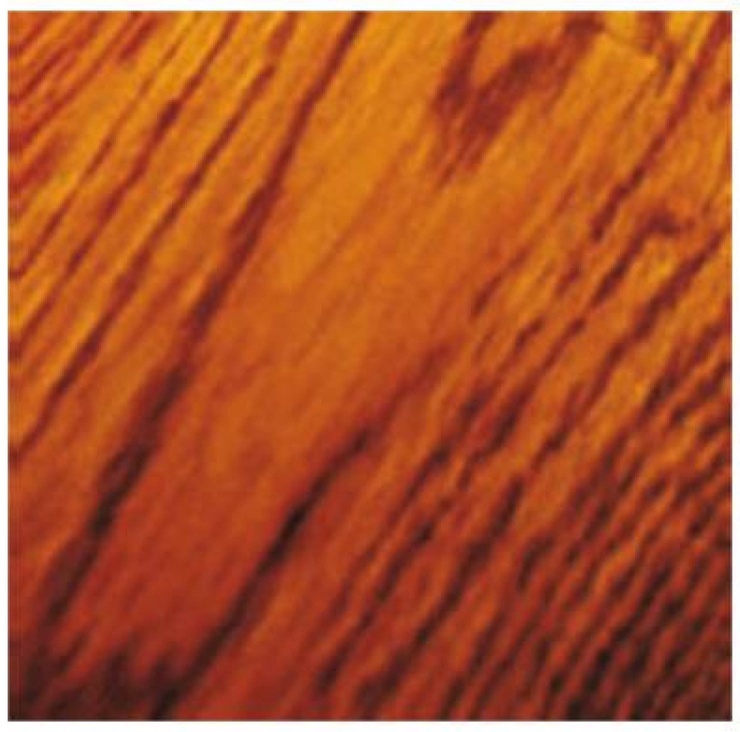
BAMBOO

Characteristics
Gives decor an exotic accent. Beautiful blond tone with natural striations. Carbonization process deepens grain and colour. Some natural shades available.

Pros
Environmentally friendly: Bamboo is a renewable, rapid-growth plant. Harder and more resistant to dampness than wood, making it particularly suitable for the kitchen and basement.

Cons
Relatively limited selection of shades.

Cost
$7-$10 per square foot



ENGINEERED WOOD

Characteristics
An alternative to hardwood and laminate, this is the most versatile option in this category.

Pros
Produced by adhering sheets of real wood to a composite surface. Does not expand or contract with temperature changes. Sold prefinished. Can be glued or clicked into place directly over concrete or an acoustic underlayment.

Cons
Less durable than hardwood. Cannot be sanded more than twice.

Cost
$12-$20 per square foot

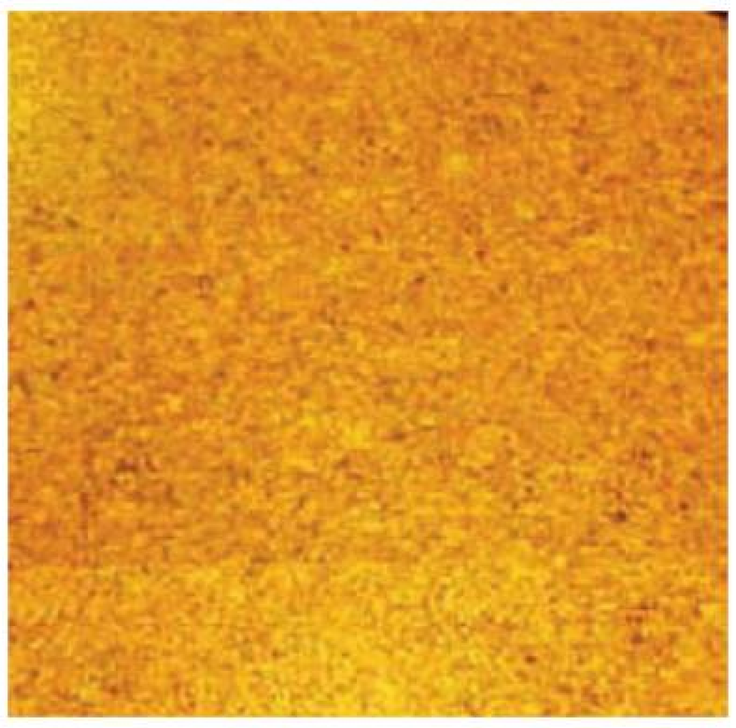
CONCRETE

Characteristics
Provides the industrial look that's increasingly popular.

Pros
Perfect for lofts. Good selection of colours and finishes.

Cons
Can cause leg and back discomfort after prolonged standing. Surface receiving the concrete must be properly prepared. Needs yearly resealing.

Cost
About $13 per square foot



CORK

Characteristics
Available in tiles or interlocking planks to make a floating floor. Good selection of colours and styles, allowing you to create a one-of-a-kind design.

Pros
Warm and cushiony on bare feet. Hypoallergenic and mildew- and dent-resistant, making it suitable even for bathrooms. As durable as wood, but an extra application of sealer is recommended in damp rooms.

Cons
Does not go well with all decors. Less popular than wood.

Cost
$6-$16 per square foot

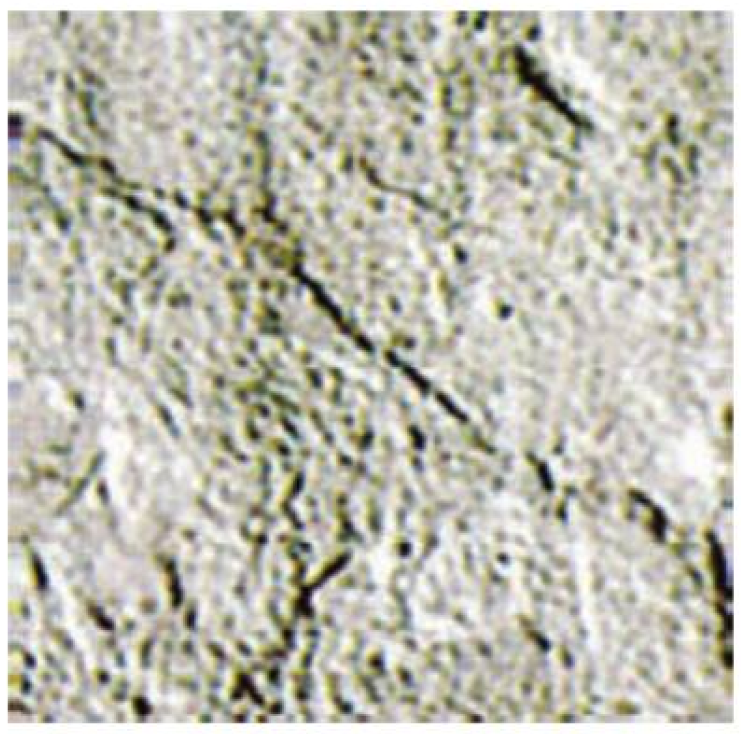
HARDWOOD

Characteristics
Oak and maple are the most popular. New: pre-oiled exotic woods, now available with semi-gloss and gloss finishes.

Pros
Forms a warm, natural atmosphere. Never goes out of fashion. More comfortable for legs and back than harder surfaces. Durable if properly sealed. With oiled floors, a sanding and a coat of mineral oil will hide scratches. Look for longer boards to avoid a patchwork effect.

Cons
Requires resealing every few years, but floorboards with a factory-sealed finish can be extremely resistant if they're good quality. Dirt can accumulate in too-wide joints between boards.

Cost
$7-$22 per square foot



NATURAL STONE

Characteristics
Slate, marble, limestone and sandstone are popular choices.

Pros
Slab marble and limestone are not especially hard-wearing, but tumbled (travertine) marble is highly durable.

Cons
Can cause leg and back discomfort after prolonged standing. Because it is a natural material, stone can contain imperfections (texture, colour, veining). Needs regular sealing.

Cost
$8-$50 per square foot

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Note: Prices are guidelines only and include installation.

FORTUNE STEP

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What's New in Bathrooms?

The bath is becoming evermore high-tech and environmentally friendly. But that doesn't mean you have to give up comfort, convenience – or luxury.

BY **MARTHA UNIACKE BREEN**

The watchword for 2009 is "eco-chic" – with materials and designs that are both beautiful and sustainable. Technology has given us highly efficient, new shower sprays that use a small fraction of the water used by traditional showers. It has given us lighting that is equally efficient in both use and spending and materials that are environmentally sustainable and beautiful.

But perhaps just as good for the environment and the soul, there is a new emphasis on simple, uncluttered design: the natural striations of bamboo, the smooth beauty of marble and limestone and the sparkle of polished chrome and glass. The 2009 bath is a retreat from a complicated world.

DESIGN ELEMENTS

There is a move toward contemporary design even in traditional homes, since the bath is seen as a more private space and thus open to more individual expression.

The New York-loft look – with plenty of open space, a squared-off uncomplicated design and subdued colour or white with deep-stained wood (à la Brian Gluckstein or Barbara Barry) – replaces the hotel look as the influence of the year. It's more personal and relaxed.

In traditional designs, Art Deco and early- to mid-20th century modern elements such as graceful, simple lines and colours are quieter than Baroque traditional but more personal than a purely modern look.

Despite this toned-down, streamlined look, baths are still all about comfort: heated floors, multiple shower heads and, if there's room, an upholstered sofa covered in a water-friendly material (such as white terry cloth) for alternative seating.

Professional spa elements are borrowed for the home spa, both visually and functionally: soft, watery colours such as pale green and blue, white-on-white, light-coloured or white-washed woods, polished metals.

Bling or sparkle adds life to an otherwise subdued design: inset-crystal faucet handles and cabinet hardware, high-gloss glass mosaic tile, chandeliers, decorative mirrors.

Bath "furniture," whether built-in or stand-alone, softens the hard edges of the room.

As in the kitchen, efficient and ample storage is important: The pedestal sink gives way to the built-in vanity, even in the powder room.

Left: The Kohler Fountainhead VibrAcoustic bath features sound vibration, chromatherapy and music for an unforgettable spa experience.
Above: Plumbing is kept out-of-sight in this design by Kohler.

High-tech elements – such as programmable sprays, a teak shower receptor drain and low threshold – characterize this state-of-the-art shower by Kohler.

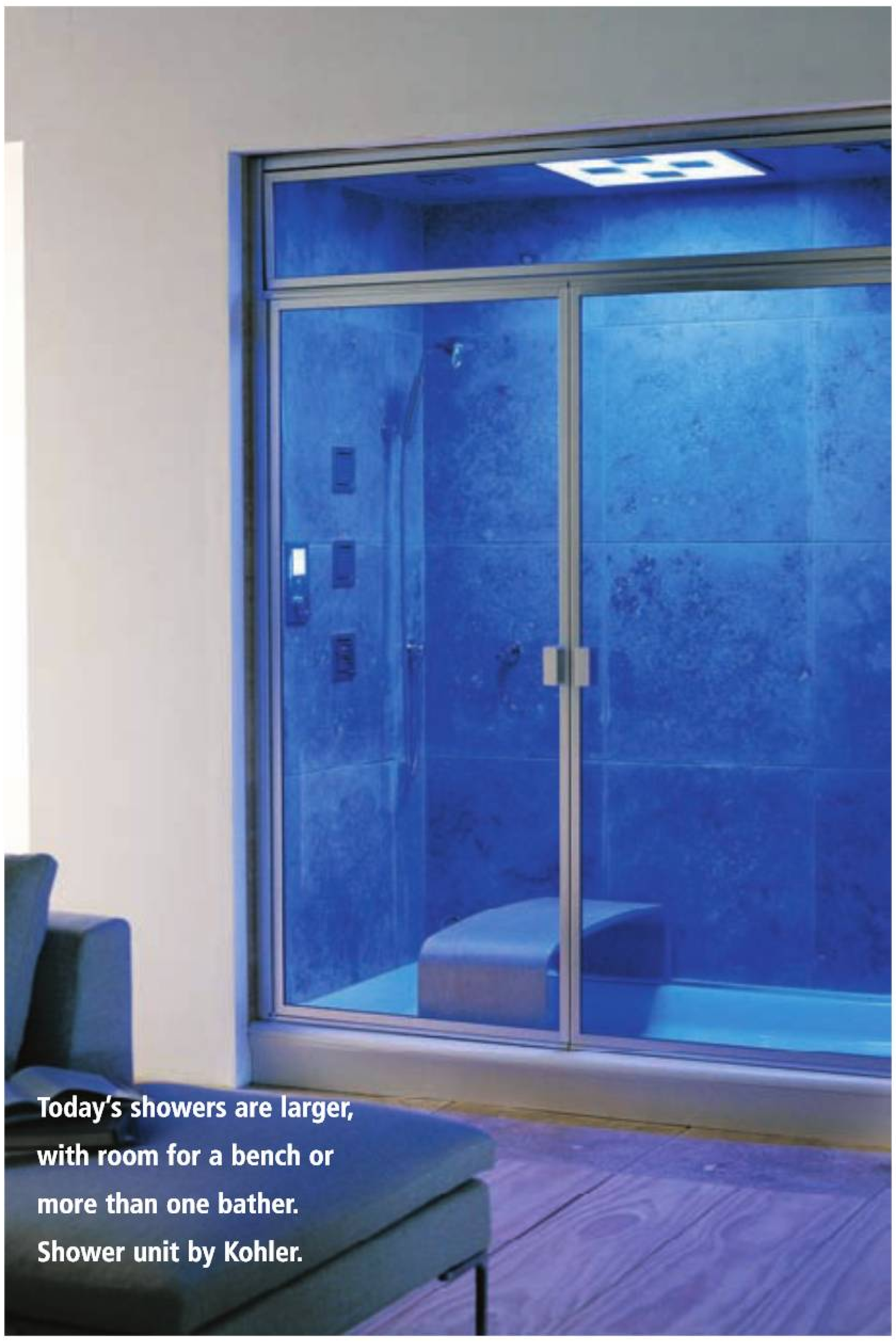
FINISHES

- Natural stone, such as marble, limestone, slate and granite, provides a soothing, natural ambience.
- For pure luxury, metals – even real gold! – are often inset in glass tiles.
- Glass mosaics are still a favourite: Bright colours are making way for softer tones or natural whites, with subtle variations from one tile to the next to create a textured effect.
- Stainless steel is as intelligent as it is practical, even for the bath: It is hygienic, recyclable, inert and free of toxins that can leach from other metals, and it has a softer look than high-gloss metals such as chrome, making it attractive in faucets and other bathroom fixtures.
- Bamboo is another environmentally friendly and attractive material. Beyond cabinetry and flooring, it may be used as a laminate on vessel basins, in storage units, countertops and accessories and even as a fibre in towels and other bath linens.

SHOWERS

- "Smart," adjustable showers can be programmed to "remember" every family member's personal preference for temperature,

PHOTO: MICHAEL GRAYDON (BOTTOM).



Today's showers are larger, with room for a bench or more than one bather. Shower unit by Kohler.

Baths aren't always rectangular: This squared-off oval shape creates a bath "centre" within the room.

pressure and configuration of sprays and shower heads and accessed at the push of a button.

■ Larger showers offer greater freedom of movement today but also a sense of changing needs in the future: They can be built to accommodate a wheelchair or shower chair and with a low (or no) curb for easy access and minimal chance of tripping.

■ Shower seating allows you to sit to shave your legs and is essential for the needs of seniors or others having difficulty standing.

■ Steam units are coming down dramatically in price, providing a water-saving and relaxing experience at home.

■ Other relaxing therapies can include chromatherapy, whereby washes of colour can be introduced to the shower for mood effects.

■ TUBS

■ In keeping with larger showers and shower sprays, the tub is getting larger too, for a relaxed, peaceful soak at the end of the day.

■ New shapes such as cubes, egg shapes or swooped sides (a 1920s look and feel) are available.

■ Soaker tubs are coming back, though air-jet and whirlpool tubs are still going strong.

■ Stand-alone units with the faucets mounted on the floor provide an uncluttered look with a subtle sense of history as well.

■ SINKS

■ The vessel, or raised, basin is available in many configurations and is seen as the artistic centrepiece of the bathroom, almost to the point of resembling a sculpture or ceramic art, often with hand-painting or cloisonné, mosaic designs.

■ Materials range from jewel-toned and textured glass to ceramics, matte-finish porcelain, stainless steel and carved, moulded or cast concrete.

■ Shapes also vary widely: Beyond the classic bowl shape, there are squares, rectangles, cylinder or cheese-wheel shapes and flat shapes with a shallow indentation for the basin.

■ Wall-mounted units keep the floor clear, which is practical for cleaning and visually give a more open, uncluttered look.

PHOTO: KOHLER (BATH).

Right: Coordinated bath furniture like this vanity and mirror by Kohler make an elegant statement in the bathroom.

Below: Beautiful, renewable materials and designs, such as this bamboo pedestal by Stone Forest, reflect a new awareness of the environment in bath design.

LIGHTING

- Subdued, adjustable and elegant is the rule: Dimmers adjust that bright lighting used for shaving or makeup applications into soft and subdued lighting for a relaxing soak in the tub.
- A crystal or vintage chandelier instead of a harsh overhead fixture adds atmosphere and sparkle.

FAUCETS

- Beautifully simple and streamlined in design: Gloss finishes especially nickel, with its slightly warmer tone predominate for a touch of sparkle.
- New shapes include squared off rather than tubular, flat and sleek lines, or even linear or waterfall spouts.
- At the high end: Enamelled all-black or all-white faucets for a sleek look and brass are starting to appear.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

- Second only to the kitchen as the most energy-demanding room in the home is the bathroom. Efficiency, then, is very important, particularly when it comes to saving water: Toilets are becoming more efficient with dual-flush units, high-pressure/low-water models and built-in cleaning and drying units that replace the bidet with a fraction of water usage.
- The newest multiple-shower and rain-shower sprays actually use only slightly more water than an old fashioned single shower head by combining air and water to increase pressure without using more water. Remember that any shower uses less water than a bath.
- Lighting technologies coming to the bath include LEDs, compact fluorescent fixtures and dimmers.
- Radiant-heat floors provide coziness while using less energy. ☐

Our thanks to Binns Designer Kitchens and Baths, Pickering, Ont.; Ginger's, Toronto; TUBS The Ultimate Bath Store, North York, Ont.; and Taps Bath Centre, Toronto.

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Revive Your Bathroom

Here are 10 ways to give your bathroom a makeover.

BY **SARAH RICHARDSON**

PHOTOS: VIRGINIA MACDONALD (5), NICOLAS RUEL (8), JEAN LONGPRÉ (6), PETER BRAGIANNIS (2).

1 Choose **light and neutral colours** on structural elements, as well as on wall and floor tiles, and save the strong colours for the accessories. This will make it easier to refresh the decor every few years.

2 If space is at a premium, opt for **wall faucets**: You'll save considerable space.

3 Use a **pale colour on the ceiling**. Pale blue, silvery green or buttery yellow will achieve the desired effect.

4 Install **tilted mirrors**, which can be used by people of all heights.

5 For a sophisticated rustic tone, favour **natural materials** such as slate (for its anti-slip properties), marble and various kinds of wood.

6 To store linen and other supplies, opt for **articles of furniture** rather than wall cupboards.

7 Transform an **old chest of drawers into a vanity**. This type of furniture item adds incredible charm.

8 Install **dimmers** on light fixtures. You'll love taking a long bath surrounded by a soft, tawny light. **Shaded wall fixtures** are also a good choice, as they cast an intimate glow reminiscent of candlelight.

9 Showcase high-end **ceramic tiles** by using them as a border or by inserting them between rows of large tiles on a floor mosaic. This type of composition lends added depth and personality to the room.

10 From a **design perspective**, ensure continuity and maintain that vision when redecorating your bathroom. You can still create a distinct atmosphere without leaving the impression that the room is in an entirely different world. □

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Twelve Ways to Revamp a Room

Once a room has been renovated, chances are the rest of your home's interior will seem somewhat dated. Here are 12 less-than-extreme makeovers sure to add a fresh new feel.

BY **KARL LOHNES**

1 **TAKE A GOOD, LONG LOOK AT THE WINDOWS.** Whether made-to-measure or ready-to-hang, curtains add charm and colour to windows. For a dramatic look, add 20 centimetres to the length and let them fall to the floor.

2 **GIVE IN TO GREEN.** Plants and flowers are an essential part of every successful interior. Aromatic herbs in a kitchen window box will add zest to the room. Insufficient lighting a problem? The new generation of silk plants confounds even the skeptics.

3 **ROLL OUT THE CARPET.** The mere presence of a rug can change the mood of a room. For winter months, give some thought to wool, with rich hues and Persian motifs. For spring and summer, opt instead for sisal, sea rush or bright-coloured cotton.

4 **CHANGE THE FRAMES ON WALL HANGINGS.** Largely because of their frames or mats, some artwork or photographs seem like they're straight out of the '60s or '70s. Lend renewed life to your favourite works by changing the frames in favour of larger-sized models in darker wood.

5 **LIGHT THE FIRE.** Why not install an electric fireplace or a decorative mantel in your living room, dining room or bedroom? It's an easy and original way to create a point of interest without giving up much floor space.

6 **REPLACE THE HARDWARE.** The easiest way to refresh your kitchen cupboards is to change the hardware. (In the rest of the house, you can change the door handles.) Gold, antique brass or veined brown evoke tradition, whereas steel, stainless steel and nickel make for a more modern look.

7 **PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE STAIRS.** The oft-neglected stairways can easily be spruced up with a new carpet or wall hangings. Railings can be repainted and lighting can be added to point out the stairway's best features.

8 **YIELD TO THE CHARMS OF COLOUR.** Don't be afraid to be bold – even if you use coloured paint on only one wall. Find inspiration in small accessories. It isn't necessary to opt for an unusual or stunning tone. A simple dark grey, green, taupe or brown can have just as much of an impact without making you dizzy.

9 **MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR LIGHTING.** By changing an old pink lampshade for a black or white one, you'll transform a shopworn lamp in a heartbeat. Other options: fluorescent or halogen fixtures beneath the kitchen cupboards, or fixtures above the wall hangings to showcase your artwork.

10 **BRING THE GARDEN INSIDE.** An aquarium, a fountain, a small Zen garden or a large exotic aviary will inject life into your home...and get your guests talking.

11 **GROUP YOUR TREASURES.** If your collectibles are spread throughout the entire house, instead display them together on shelves, which could fill up an otherwise empty space. Remember that floating wall shelves must blend with the colour of the walls or complement the woodwork.

12 **TAKE UP A THEME.** Be it the tropics, the Victorian period or hotel style, select lamps, cushions, vases and accessories that reflect your favourite theme – and you don't have to spend a fortune doing it. Washrooms, guest rooms and hallways lend themselves effectively to this approach. □

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PHOTOS: JAMES TSE (LEFT PAGE). VIRGINIA MACDONALD (5). BENJAMIN MOORE (8).

2

Window Covering Your Best Bets

Tips on how to use lighting without sacrificing your privacy.

BY **CHANTAL DAURAY**

CHOOSING THE RIGHT WINDOW COVERING

Your budget, tastes, needs and decorating style, together with the amount of brightness you wish to achieve in the room, will guide your decisions as you consider numerous possibilities. Here are some guidelines.

1 **The kitchen.** Wood blinds and faux-wood blinds are easier to maintain than pleated blinds or curtains. The more rigid the blinds, the easier they are to clean.

2 **The bedroom.** For a more restful sleep, an opaque blind is a good choice. It can be concealed behind a valance or dressed up with attractive curtains. Other options are rigid horizontal blinds or fabric blinds combined with some curtains for greater opacity.

3 **The living room.** If you're intent on keeping prying eyes out, horizontal blinds or louvred shutters are your best option, as louvres can be inclined based on your preference for shade or light without the interior being any more visible to passersby. If privacy is not an issue, anything goes! If you choose drapes, err on the side of simplicity, keeping them in a shade similar to that of the wall.

4 **The bathroom.** Horizontal blinds are a sound choice here. However, select a waterproof material (faux wood, for example), particularly if the space is poorly ventilated or the blind is close to the shower stall.

5 **French doors.** Solar blinds (or perforated blinds) are perfectly suitable, as they reduce the glare and heat from the sun and protect furniture from UV rays. Also popular are light-filtering sunscreens (with Sheerweave) with their Japanese style and the lovely luminosity they confer on large windows. Fabric blinds are a good choice as well.

WINDOWS ABOVE ELECTRIC BASEBOARD HEATERS

Rather than hemming your curtains so that they hang just above the heater, simply move them away from the heat source with a mounting bracket (available at most hardware stores), which attaches to the baseboard heater. The effect is more elegant. As for blinds, allow a clearance of at least 30 centimetres from the baseboard heater, and if possible, avoid vinyl or plastic-based materials.

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PHOTOS : JANIS NICOLAY (OPPOSITE PAGE), DONNA GRIFFITH (LIVING ROOM), TED YARWOOD (BATHROOM).

2009 Colour Trends

More than ever, lifestyle is the inspiration for colour, and the colours we choose reflect today's major social currents: the return to simplicity, the environment and the need to personalize our interiors by every means possible. Make way for soft colours, explosive tones and, above all, unusual combinations!

BY **GENEVIÈVE PROVOST**

Sico:
1. Betrothal (6035-63)
2. Pale Chestnut (6072-52)
3. Nunavut (6181-83)

A STYLE ALL YOUR OWN

This year, decors are largely inspired by the tastes and preferences of a home's occupants. An unusual use of colour is a great way to personalize your living space. Try soft, floral hues with bright or dark colours. Black is also back in use, particularly to highlight an architectural element, and can be emphasized by combining it with a fresh, bright colour – such as pale blue – for a more joyous and lively touch.

To instill a mood both romantic and futuristic, softer nuances and chalk whites mix well with pure purple and dark slate. If a room is already painted a neutral colour, a bright, floral colour on only one wall will create a totally personalized mood, with the accessories – cushions, bedding or a rug – in other colour combinations providing the finishing touches.

Benjamin Moore:
1. Black Satin (2131-10)
2. Gossamer Blue (2123-40)
3. Brookside Moss (2145-30)

1	2	3

Sico:
1. Bold Blue (6022-83)
2. Basalt Gray (6208-63)
3. Pomelo (6101-54)

CELEBRATING BOLDNESS

If simplicity reigns in 2009, it certainly won't be lifeless, with ultra-bold and unusual colour combinations (like peach and fuchsia, mustard yellow and teal, electric blue and dark slate) getting top billing. The goal: daring to achieve a unique look by mixing and matching influences. To make this style more accessible, vibrant hues blend nicely with pastels or very dark tones and can be complemented with neutral colours. If you're afraid to try chicer colours, the colour-blocking technique is a practical and very trendy option. It consists of using colour in only one section (be it a strip, a rectangle or a square) rather than applying it to the entire room. To make the most of this look, the other walls should be painted a pale and neutral colour, even a pure white.

Benjamin Moore:
1. Eucalyptus (HC-65)
2. Dried Mustard (2158-10)
3. Gray (2121-10)

1	2	3

Sico:
1. Chanterelle Beige (6185-31)
2. Leaf Green (6140-73)
3. Virgin Olive Oil (6102-44)

1 2 3

BACK TO NATURE

Recent seasons have been marked by a surging environmental movement that's still going strong this year; now, however, the trend is purer and more pared down than ever. The objective is to combine simplicity, durability and minimalism in an effort to create rooms that are pleasant and down-to-earth. Driving this trend are materials and textures inspired by nature, such as stone and wood, which set the overall tone for decor, with rich botanical hues – green or yellow – brought in to magnify the look. For an atmosphere at once relaxing and lively, these colour tones can be coupled with whites, fresh and creamy beiges or pale greys. ☐

1 2 3

Benjamin Moore:
1. Sea Haze (2137-50)
2. Hazy Skies (OC-48)
3. White Sand (OC-10)

COLOUR NOTES

■ **Red** coupled with purple yields a burgundy, even a brick red; tinged with pink, it acquires a fresh and lively feel. ■ Sprout-inspired **greens** shot through with yellow confer an all-new softness. A small amount of blue creates a fresher and more metallic effect. ■ **Violet,** last year's star colour, warms up when red is added. ■ **Grey,** the new neutral, is now a classic available in several shades. It marries well with all colours and has a place in decors traditional *and* contemporary. This year, a delicate touch of green lends a more subtle effect. ■ **Orange** is a budding star when it comes to warming up a decor. ■ Very pale or reddish **blue** has also found its way back onto designer palettes.

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Purchasing the Right Flat-Screen TV

Televisions, digital players, broadcast control channels – with all the essentials finally available, now's the time to welcome HD into your home. The good news? Each generation of flat-screen TVs features a new perk or two and is more affordable than the last.

BY **CHRISTIAN QUIRION**

MAIN CONSIDERATIONS

Size. Initially, don't let your budget dictate the size of the television. The first thing you should consider is where you plan on setting it up. Besides the space required by the TV itself, make sure that you have enough room to sit a reasonable distance from the screen. Sitting too close will only lead to tired eyes, and there's a chance that the pixels or lines that make up the picture will be visible, greatly affecting picture quality. For optimal precision, the minimum viewing distance should be three times the height of the plasma or liquid crystal display (LCD) screen. One compromise, however, that shouldn't be made for any reason (other than a lack of space) is opting for a screen smaller than 40 inches.

LCD or plasma? These are the two principal types of flat-screen TVs. For a long time, plasma was the front-runner. However, LCD technology has since made up lost ground and their TVs are often a more attractive buy than their plasma counterparts. Also, the so-called HD models (1080p) are generally more affordable in LCD than in plasma and in most cases consume far less electricity. It's no wonder, then, that the majority of flat-screen TVs sold in Canada in the past year have been LCD. Having said that, it's important to note that more than half of these TVs were smaller than 40 inches, a segment of the market covered solely by LCD. In the segment occupied by larger flat-screen models, the market share for plasma TVs is much more significant.

Most experts agree that LCD offers superior contrast in a well-lit environment, whereas plasma is better suited to dark rooms. If your television faces a window and you don't want to draw the curtains each time you watch TV, you should be leaning toward LCD. Plasma screens hold the advantage, however, when it comes to angle of vision and depth of dark shades (which will not turn dark grey, as is the case with certain LCD models) while offering a richer range of colours. Our advice: Avoid generalizations and keep an open mind. Bring a DVD to the store and ask the salesperson to adjust the settings (brightness, contrast) so that you can see for yourself what each model is capable of, regardless of the technology. Change the position and the angle of the screen to determine if picture quality is reduced when you're not directly in front of the set.

Picture quality. Several factors have a significant impact on picture quality, though they are impossible to detect solely on the basis of the technical specifications cited for each TV. Contrast and colour sharpness should top your list of concerns. High contrast lends greater definition to the picture while enhancing detail. Faded colours will make for a picture that's less vivid, while colours that are too saturated will give the picture a surreal quality.

Unfortunately, we can't rely on the features touted by manufacturers, who sometimes go as far as misleading the consumer on the issue of performance. As well, the majority of salespeople in big-box stores don't know much more than you do and will be content to reiterate the manufacturers' claims. Our advice: Assume that these evaluations are, in large part, subjective and that people's sensitivity to colour, sharpness and detail varies widely. First and foremost, trust your own eyes and bear in mind that in-store flat-screen TV settings are seldom optimal and lighting conditions are far from ideal. □

OTHER DETAILS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Above all, don't neglect to establish your needs on the matter of connectivity. The number, accessibility and types of inputs, ports and outputs (HDMI, DVI, VGA, S-Video, composite video, speakers, USB, network) as well as the desired functionalities (Internet access, picture-in-picture, 24p mode, internal hard disk, memory-card reader, universal remote) should be contrasted and compared. Also, pay special attention to sound reproduction: Given the small size of the speakers on either side of the screen, there is often a wide disparity in sound quality from one model to the next. Finally, if you invest in a high-end model worth a few thousand dollars, it might be a good idea to take the extended warranty.

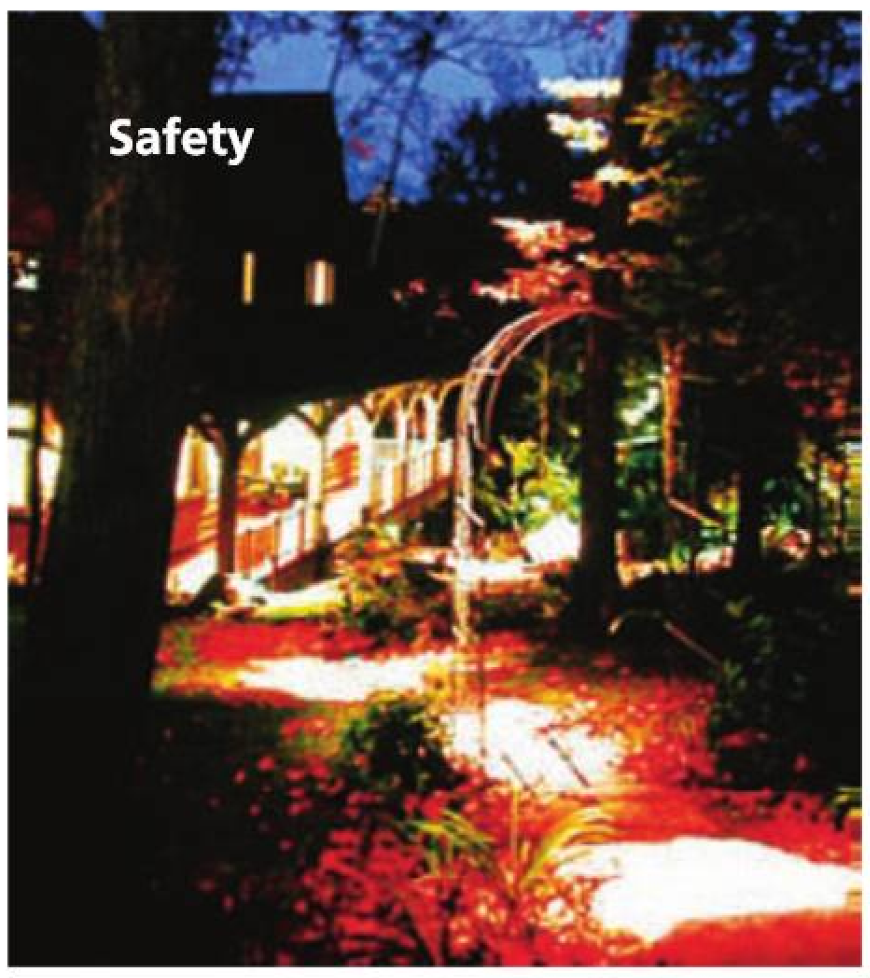
FIND A BUSINESS
LOOK BEHIND THE TAB

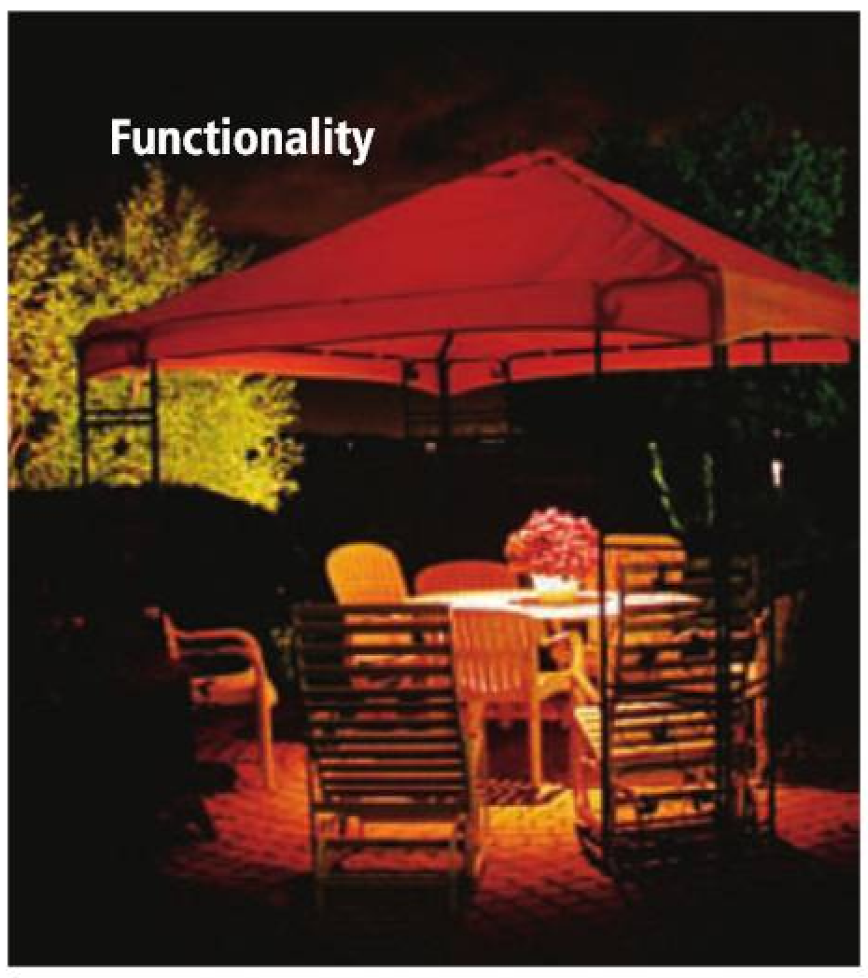
Brighten Up Your Garden

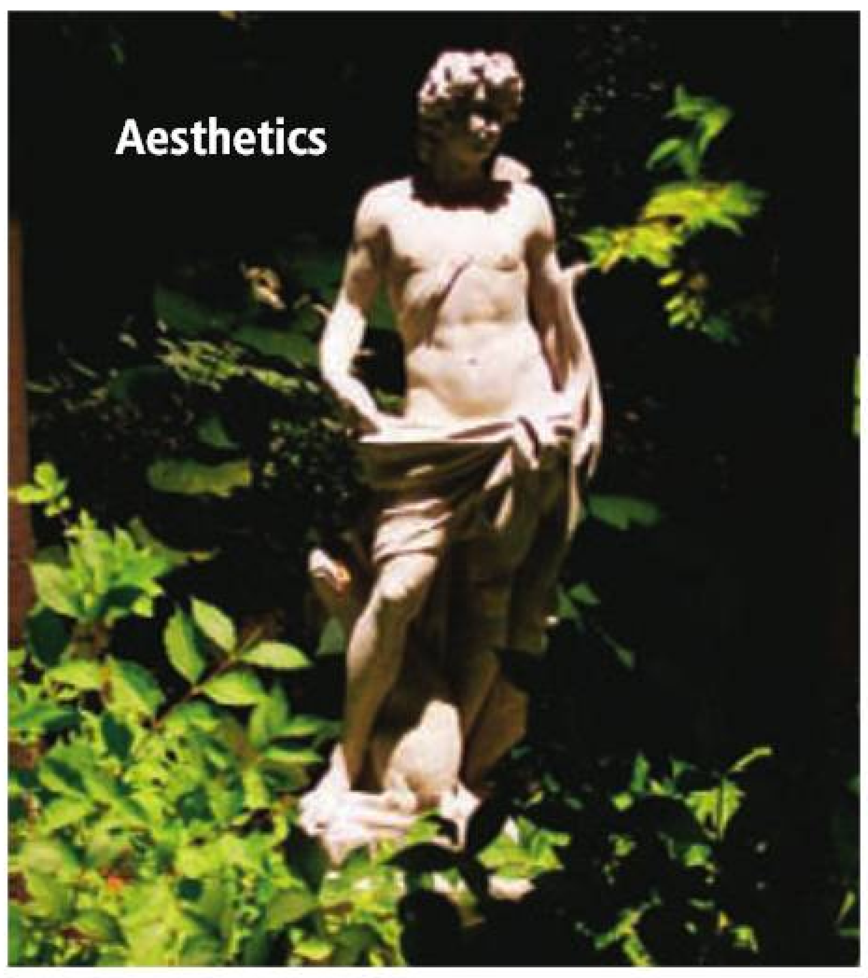
Carefully chosen lighting can transform a garden.

At long last you have the garden of your dreams, and there's nothing you'd like more than to linger there well into the evening. If only it were just a little bit brighter...

BY **ALYNE SAMSON**







PHOTOS: STEVEN S. MIRIC/SUPERSTOCK (OPPOSITE PAGE); LES JARDINS LUMIÈRES (SAFETY, FUNCTIONALITY); CLÉMENT PAGÉ/SPLENDEURS DE NUIT (AESTHETICS).

1 **WHAT ARE YOUR NEEDS?** What type of lighting do you require? You can start by strolling through the garden at sunset, watching the play of light on the plants or observing where the moonlight falls. (Repeat the exercise for a few consecutive evenings.) The same can be done inside the house to determine which outdoor elements you'd like to admire through the windows. Take note of the existing lighting (like cornice lights or luminaires) and identify the areas you'd like to brighten up.

- **Safety:** Which walls, paths, stairs, ground level, posts or doors should be lit up?
- **Functionality:** Do you intend to use a terrace, pool or spa? Will you be walking about the property or using the paths? Will you be receiving guests in the evening?
- **Aesthetics:** Are you intent on highlighting an architectural feature, such as a fountain, plant or shrub with an unusual shape or a work of art? Is there a specific atmosphere you'd like to create?

2 **SHOULD YOU DRAW UP A PLAN?** If you already have a layout, make sure that you have several working copies. If not, draw one up on plotting paper. Include the property lines, the house, the location of the electrical outlets, as well as the different elements you'd like to emphasize (shrubbery, the pool, the terrace).

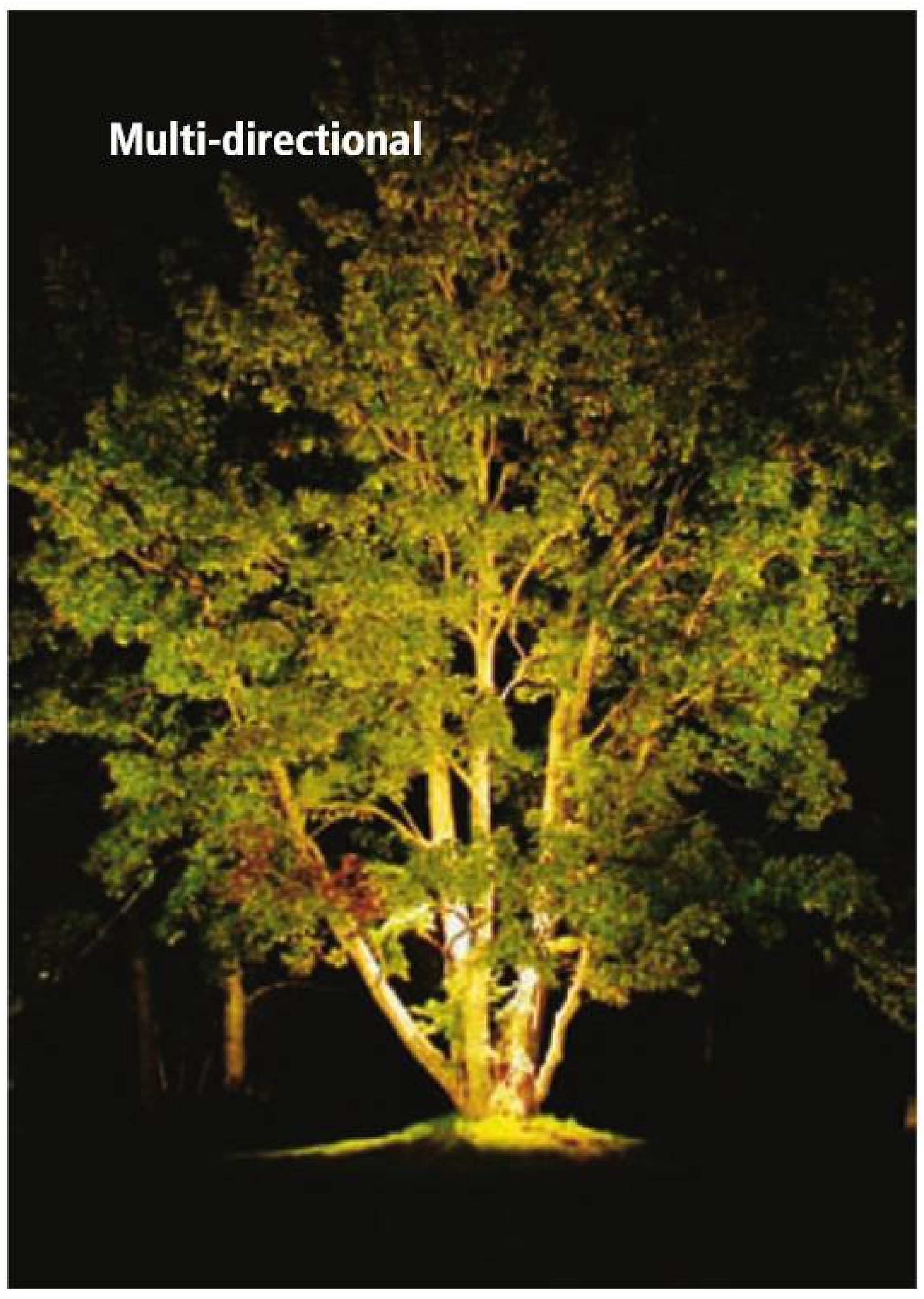
As you walk through the garden, take measurements to determine how much wire you will need (if you opt for a low-voltage system). How long are the paths? What is the distance between the outdoor outlet and the elements you intend to highlight? How can the wire be safely run along fences or foundations?

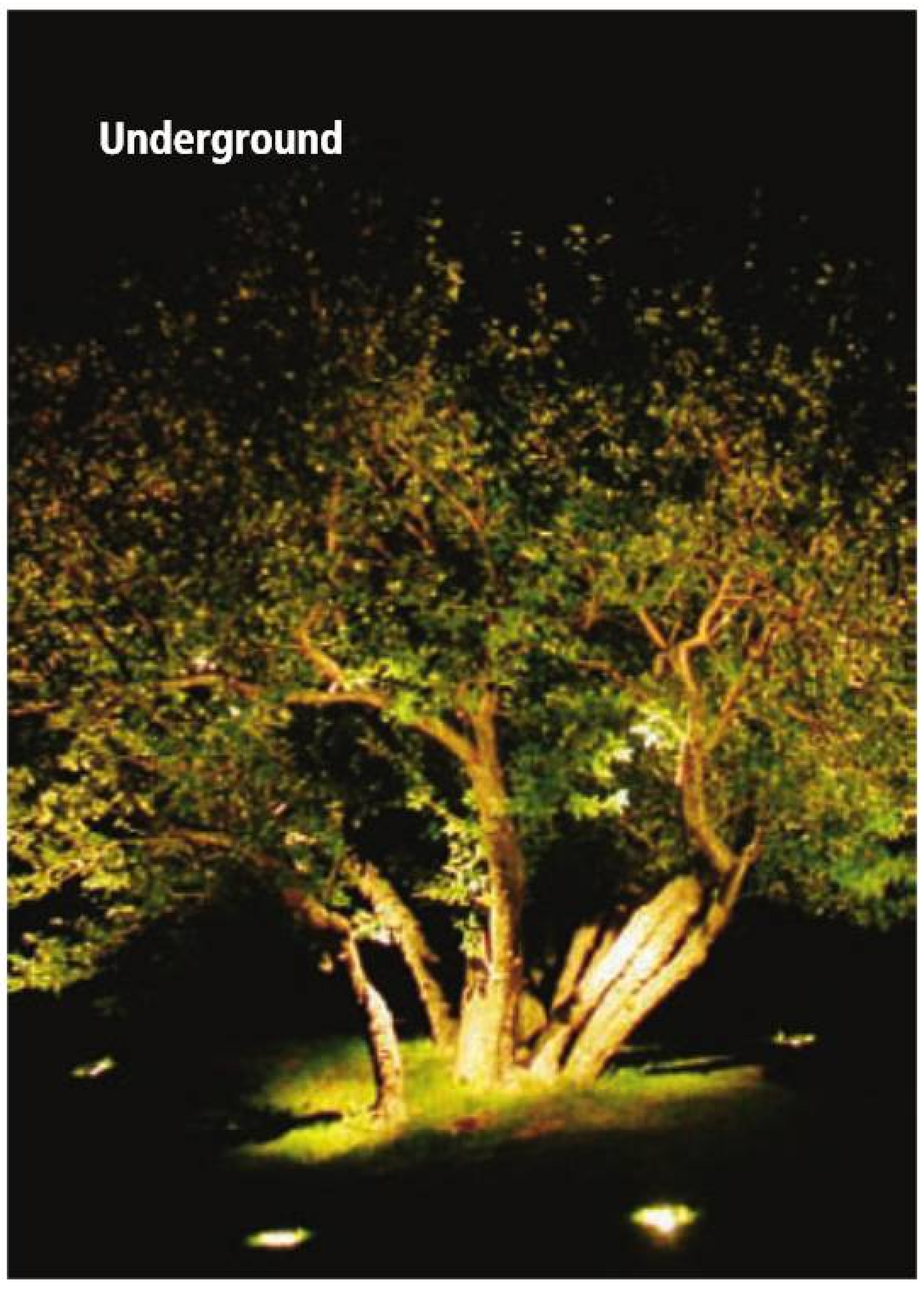
The number of light fixtures needed depends on the dimensions of the lighting plan: the size of the garden, the elements you intend to emphasize, the desired lighting intensity and which effects you'd like to create. The golden rule of professionals is that less is always better. A successful lighting plan is not too bright, nor does it illuminate *everything*.

FIVE EYE-CATCHING EFFECTS

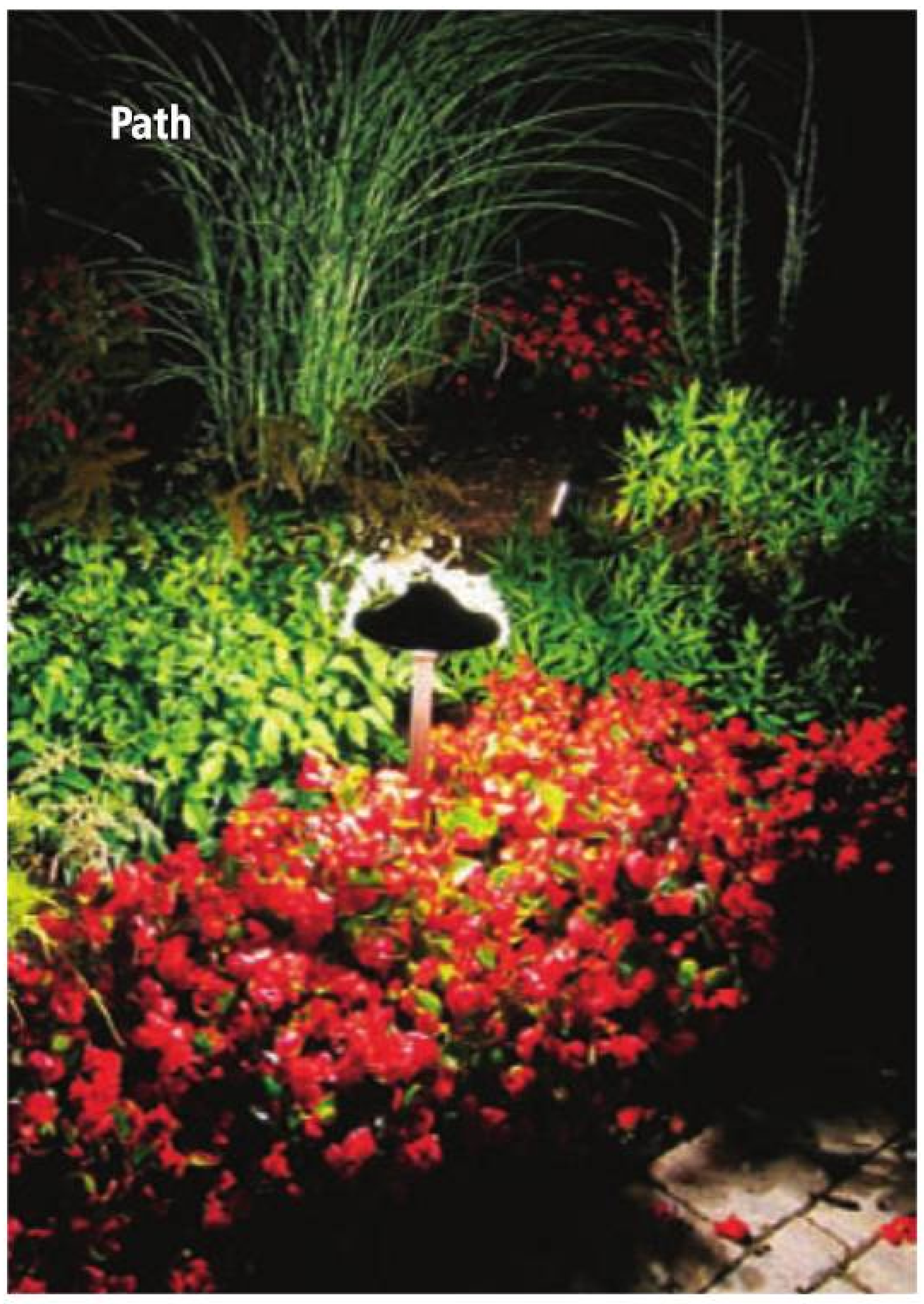
Here are a few basic strategies for creating a compelling visual impact.

■ Direct. The light beam should point directly at the subject. ■ Upward-pointing. When angled upwards, lighting emphasizes the bark, foliage or shape of a plant or tree. ■ Intersecting. Two light fixtures placed at opposite ends cast light on the same subject. ■ Artificial moonlight. A low-intensity light fixture installed over a tree (no more than two to three metres high, for easy maintenance) that projects light downwards, casting a shadow of the branches onto the ground. ■ Shadow lamp. A spotlight points toward a plant whose shadow is cast onto an adjacent wall or surface.


Multi-directional

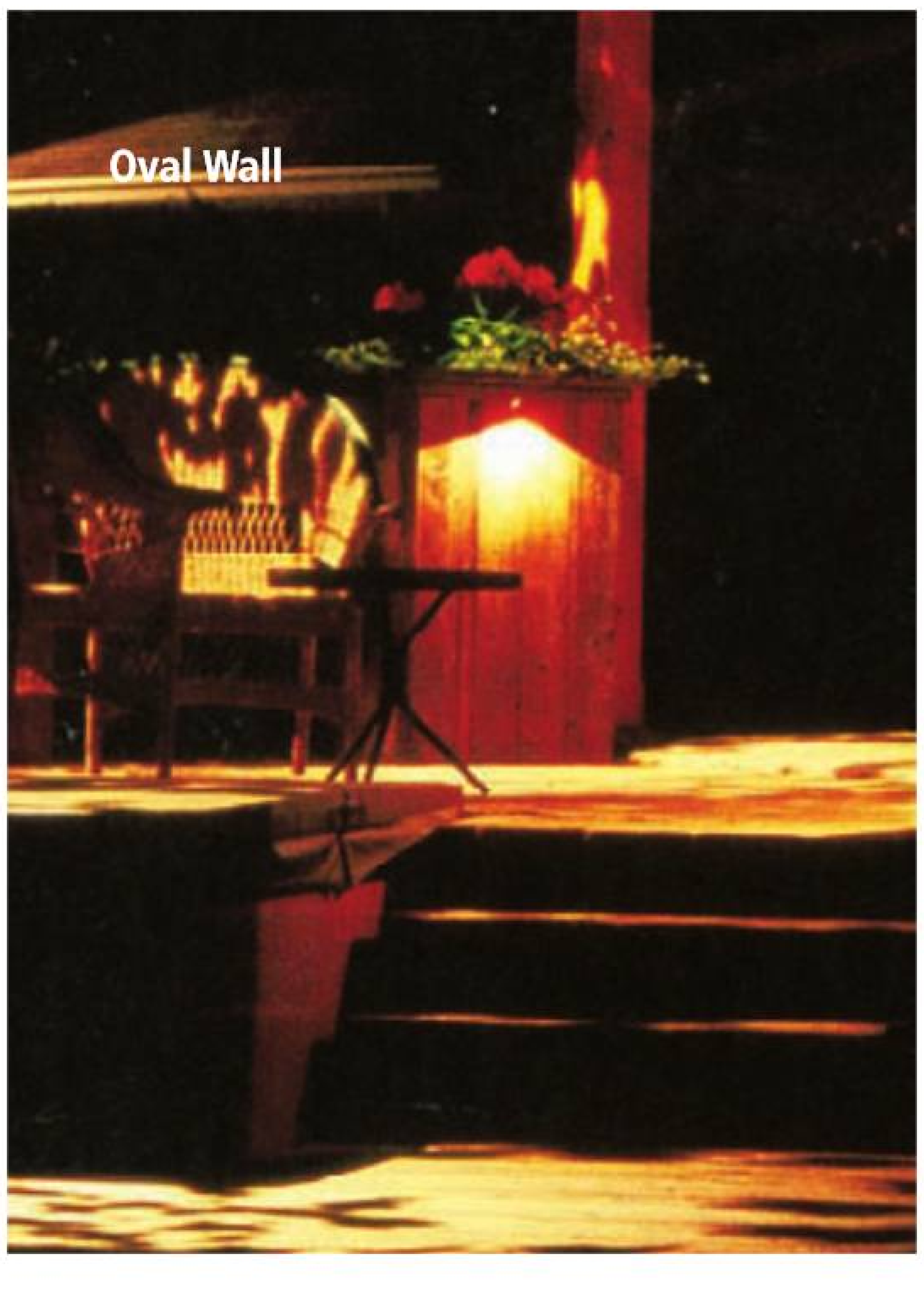

Underground

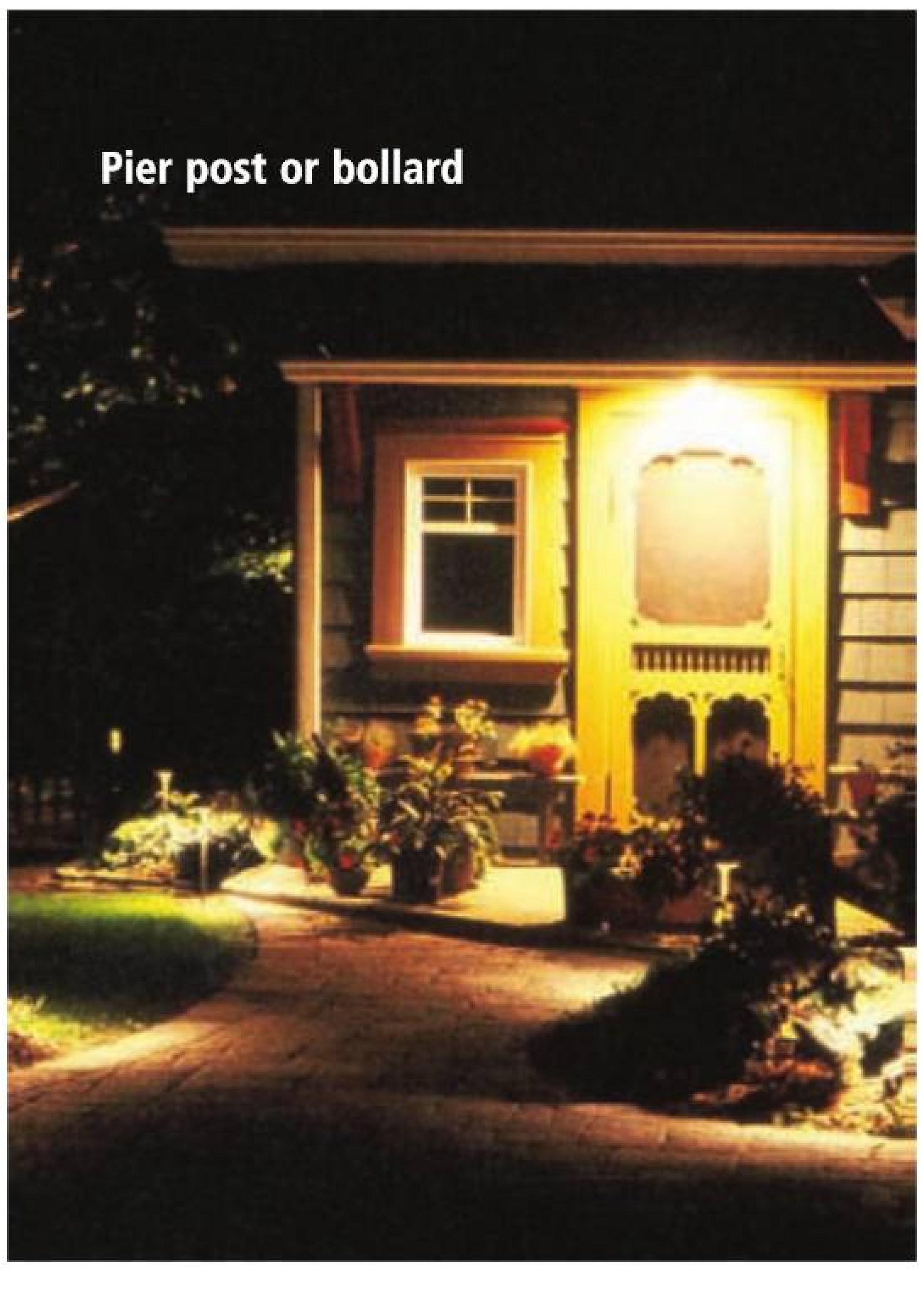
Submersible

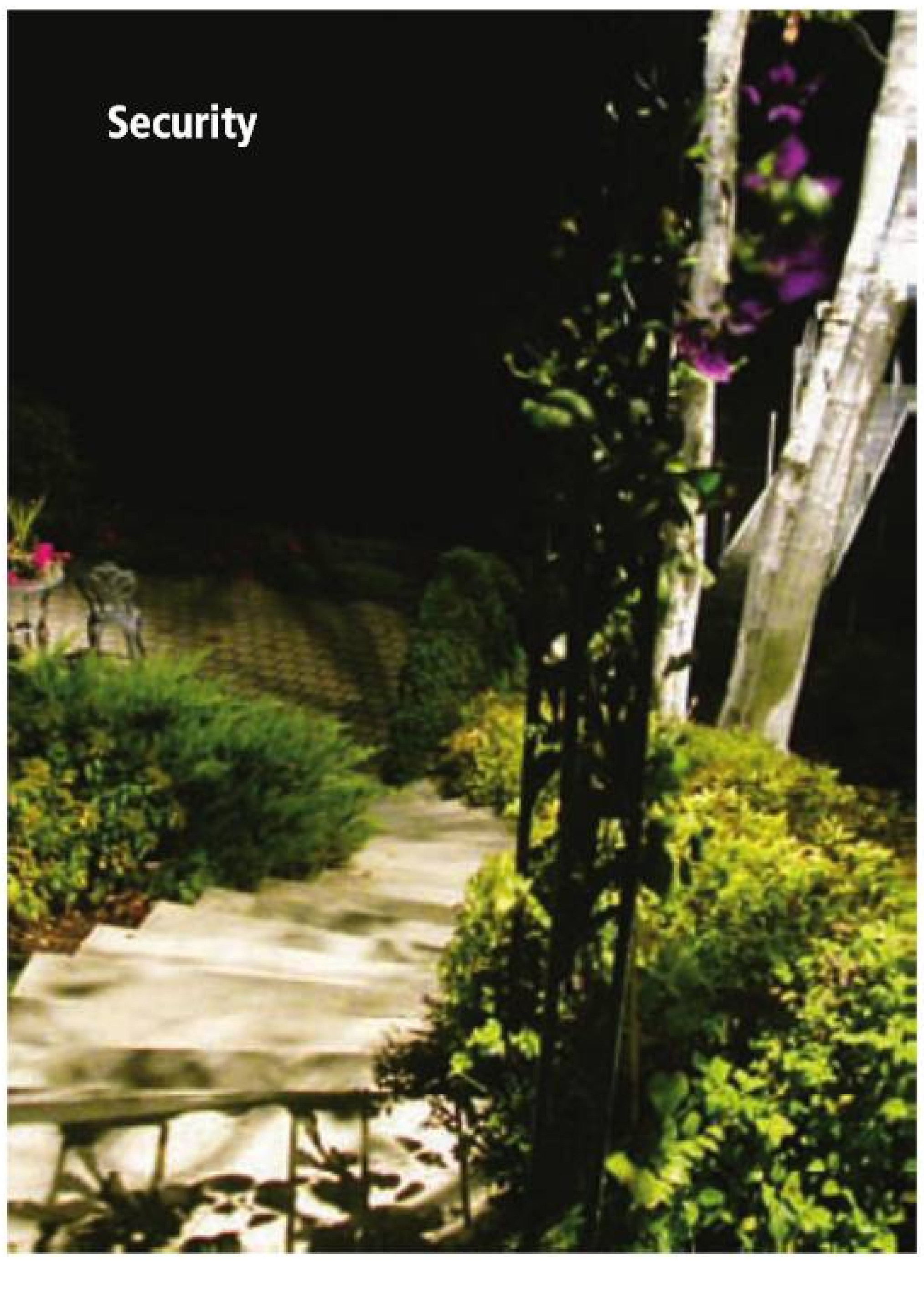

Path

3 **WHAT TYPE SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?** Each type of light fixture serves a specific purpose. The following is a list of common models and their uses.

- **Multi-directional spotlight.** The beam is used to highlight a specific decorative element, like a plant or a statue.
- **Underground spotlight.** A buried fixed beam. Some models, geared specifically to rock gardens, are hidden inside a rock, either real or artificial. Used to shed light on a specific spot.
- **Submersible spotlight.** Fixed or adjustable beam, depending on the model, installed underwater. Used for pool lighting.
- **Path light.** Projects light downwards. Used along path edges or in plant beds.


Oval Wall


Pier post or bollard


Security

- **Oval wall fixture.** Diffuses light on all sides. Used for fencing, terraces, pergolas, house walls and stairs.
- **Pier post or bollard fixture.** Offers diffuse light all around. Used to mark off the edges of a path or plant bed.
- **Security lighting.** Projects light downwards. Wall-mounted and recessed models are available. Used to highlight vertical changes (stairs, terrace levels).

4 ELECTRICAL OR SOLAR POWER? Two major categories of light fixtures are available.

- **Low-voltage electrical lighting.** Light fixtures that fall into this category are the most popular and best performing models used by the pros. A transformer plugged into an outdoor outlet reduces the domestic current to 12 volts, a voltage comparable to that of a car battery. But an electrician is required to install any outdoor outlets compliant with the Canadian Electrical Code and to ensure that your installation doesn't overload circuit breakers.

  Advantages: Meets almost all garden-lighting requirements ■ A wide range of models, designs and colours are available ■ Affordable

  Disadvantages: Requires several pieces of equipment (transformer, wire, connectors) ■ Time must be spent plugging in, as well as running and camouflaging, wires
- **Rechargeable-battery-operated solar lighting systems.** These are used mostly for decorative accent lighting. Recent neon and LED (light-emitting diode) models offer performance far superior to that of their pale yellow forebears and provide eight to 15 lighting hours per day. In reality, even when the battery is fully charged, the lighting these systems provide is only half as effective as that of low-voltage systems, barely enough to mark out a small path or plant bed. They are geared mostly to small spaces exposed to the sun but where nighttime lighting needs are minimal (like an outdoor terrace or a balcony).

  Advantages: Wireless ■ Do not consume electricity (the rechargeable AA batteries are replaced every two to three years) ■ Easy to install, move and store in winter ■ Tabletop or floating models are available

  Disadvantages: Weak lighting ■ Lighting hours and power are proportionate to exposure to sunlight (if days are grey or the lamp is poorly placed, lighting will be weak and short-lived) ■ Only available in a limited range of fixtures and colours

THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS OF GOOD NEIGHBOURING

Poorly designed, misdirected or excessive lighting can be blinding or intrusive. To avoid sowing discord with your neighbours:

1. Use the fewest fixtures possible for your lighting purposes.

2. Make sure the beams are pointed in such a way that they don't have a blinding effect on you or your neighbours.

3. Use minimum-intensity bulbs.

4. Use a lighting timer.

5. Devise a plan based on having separate lighting areas to highlight different sections of the garden.

5 CAN YOU INSTALL THE LIGHTING YOURSELF? In general, doing it yourself saves money. If your expectations are realistic and you're willing to be patient, you can come up with a perfectly suitable lighting plan. Don't expect to achieve the kind of spectacular results featured in books, however, as artistic lighting is a specialty requiring know-how, skill and sophisticated equipment.

For a lavish and spectacular result, your best bet is to hire a lighting designer. He or she will experiment with different types of lighting, as well as look at varying intensities and beam widths using professional-quality bulbs and light fixtures. It's not unusual for a pro to use up to 18 different bulb types in a single garden! □

NEED INSPIRATION?

We recommend *Creative Garden Lighting* by Michele Osborne (Timber Press, 2005).

FIND A BUSINESS
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PHOTOS: LES JARDINS LUMIÈRES (MULTI-DIRECTIONAL, UNDERGROUND, SECURITY); CLÉMENT PAGÉ/SPLENDEURS DE NUIT (SUBMERSIBLE, PATH); JARDIN D'OMBRE ET DE LUMIÈRE (OVAL WALL, PIER POST OR BOLLARD).

Purchasing a Hot Tub

Relax amid swirling waters...in summer and winter! If you're toying with the idea of purchasing a hot tub for your backyard, there are a few things you should know before you jump in.

BY **CLAIRE HARVEY**

Hot tubs have become increasingly popular – with good reason. First, unlike swimming pools, they can be used year-round, thus giving you a better return on your investment. What's more, because a hot tub doesn't have to be closed for the winter (unless you're unable to maintain it), you'll save on pool starter and closing kits. There are other advantages. A hot tub takes up less space and requires less maintenance than a swimming pool, and it can easily be moved. As well, a permit isn't required to install one, nor is it necessary to build a fence around it. All you have to do is lock up the cover when the hot tub is not in use. And last, but certainly not least, the hot tub is a haven of peace: It promotes relaxation, offers all of the benefits of hydrotherapy and, with its therapeutic qualities, it can be a boon to people with back pain and sore muscles.

PHOTO: CLUB PISCINES.

Conversely, a hot tub will drive up your winter hydro bill by one to three dollars per day, and the children won't have as much fun as they would in a swimming pool. Also, its hot water (between 35°C and 40°C) will offer no relief during a heat wave. That's not even mentioning the cost: between $5,000 and $15,000 compared to just over $3,000 for an above-ground swimming pool measuring 21 feet in diameter.

SIZE

Hot tubs come in a variety of sizes designed to accommodate anywhere from 2 to 10 people. Before selecting a size, though, it's important to consider the space you have available and to determine where you intend to place the unit. As well, consult your municipality and your insurer to find out how much distance is required between the hot tub and both the house and the edge of the property.

Then you'll want to think about how much space you need to be comfortable. How many people will be using it at the same time? Do you intend to soak solo, with a significant other, as a family or with friends? A word of advice: You're better off basing your choice on its actual use than its potential use. In general, a five-person unit will suffice to accommodate a family and, occasionally, friends.

YOUR NEEDS

Choose a hot tub that suits your tastes, needs and lifestyle. Will it be used to socialize, relax and re-energize or soothe aching muscles? In the first two instances, a 20-jet hot tub should be more than enough – better yet, it won't be too loud. In the latter case, a minimum of 30 jets is needed to massage your body from the tips of your toes to the nape of your neck. If you suffer from back pain, opt for one with jets pointed toward the length of the spine. Note that pregnant women and people with heart conditions are advised to avoid hot tubs.

The number of seats should also be taken into account. In general, a five- or six-person model is recommended. Each place is outfitted with jets meant to massage specific parts of the body, and the user will have to sit in every place to obtain a total body massage. A four-person hot tub features fewer jets, and as a result its massage won't be quite as complete.

PHOTO: TRÉVI.

1

THE COMPONENTS

To ensure that you're purchasing a quality product, pay special attention to each of the following components.

1 **The shell.** Made of acrylic, fibreglass and resin, a quality shell must be at least five millimetres thick, and the corners and other strategic areas – the entire bottom, the seat bottoms and the area underneath the edges – should be reinforced with fibreglass. To be certain that this is the case, ask to view a slice of the material and verify the minimum thickness. Finishes are available in matte, pearl or a granite-like texture. Choose whichever you prefer, but bear in mind that scratches won't show as much on a granite-like or pearl finish. Some manufacturers use Microban technology to prevent the spread of bacteria responsible for odours and stains. However, while this technology preserves the shiny finish and doesn't entail additional costs, it does not necessarily guarantee quality.

2 **Insulation.** Given the rigours of our climate, the hot tub should feature top-quality insulation. Otherwise, your hydro bill will be sky-high, and in the event of a power outage it will quickly cool down, increasing the likelihood of damage. There are two types of insulation procedures: The tub can be completely covered with insulating foam, or it can be insulated with a combination of polyurethane foam and vapour barrier. In either case, all four panels must be insulated. According to retailers, the two procedures are equally effective, though the second provides easier access to the plumbing in case of a breakdown, which may save time and money.

3

3 The skirt. A hot tub is generally surrounded by a wooden structure meant to level it and support the shell. This structure also houses the skirt, an outer layer made of cedar or resin. Cedar is rot-proof, though it turns slightly grey over time; this in no way affects its durability, but some people find the look displeasing. To preserve the skirt's colour, therefore, treatment with a water-repellent product is suggested. To reduce maintenance time, opt for a wood-imitation resin skirt, which is comparable in price to cedar. An important point: The various sections of the skirt must be removable. If a part breaks, you'll want to be able to get to it easily by removing the appropriate panel.

4 The pump. The pump serves to control the power of the jets. For a quick dip in low turbulence, a single pump is more than enough. For a therapeutic massage, however, two pumps are necessary, and a third may be added for a more vigorous massage. Current models have a power output ranging from 2 to 6.5 horsepower. The more jets a hot tub features, the more powerful its pumps must be. The pumps also serve to oxygenate the water by gently circulating it 24 hours a day. Several times each day, the hot tub should run at high speed for a minute to flush out the pipes.

5 Accessories. All hot tubs are equipped with at least one light and a control panel. (Make sure that the panel is easy to reach once you're seated in the tub.) Most control systems are digital and allow the user to regulate the water temperature to within one degree. Some accessories are highly recommended – like the resin step for easy entry and exit – while others are mandatory, like the circuit breaker, which prevents users from being electrocuted in the event of lightning or

PHOTO: CLUB PISCINES.

5

current variation. Manufacturers' extras may include a sound system, a DVD player or an illuminated cascade. Before you decide to purchase accessories (which increase the price tag substantially), ask yourself whether you'll put them to good use. Watching a film in a hot tub, for example, is pointless since the noise generated by the jets will muffle the sound of voices. And while relaxing in the hot tub and listening to music is an option, you can forget about having a conversation.

7

PHOTOS: TRÉVI (5). CLUB PISCINES (7).

6 **The cover.** It plays an important role by protecting water from debris, maintaining water temperature and preventing children from entering the hot tub. To ensure that the spa stays insulated and promote runoff when it rains, the cover must be domed. It must also be lockable for security reasons. The thickest part should measure at least 10 centimetres and the thinnest at least 7.5 centimetres, strong enough to support the weight of a young child. Also make sure that the leatherette is flexible enough that it doesn't crack or damage when exposed to variations in temperature. Finally, a handle is always useful to open and close the cover and to carry it to a storage area when it isn't being used.

7 **Jets.** Two main types of jets are available: hydrojets and aerojets, and they are usually combined. Hydrojets project a mixture of air and water, creating the main massage effect. The larger the hydrojets are, the softer your massage will be. Aerojets, for their part, emit thousands of tiny air bubbles, thus contributing to a feeling of weightlessness and providing a softer massage. Nozzles (water outlets) are available in several shapes, making it possible to vary the angle and movement of the jet, depending on the kind of effect (relaxing or invigorating) you want to achieve. Some nozzles are interchangeable, a potentially interesting option.

8 **Filtration.** The water from a hot tub is the ideal environment for the proliferation of bacteria, hence the importance of the filtration system. In a four-person hot tub, the antibacterial filter cartridge must be capable of cleaning a surface spanning a minimum of seven square metres. Owners are advised to buy a second filter (for purposes of rotation during cleaning) and closely follow the manufacturer's cleaning instructions. Cartridges last roughly one year and cost approximately $100. Also important is making sure that the skimmer door assembly measures at least 25 centimetres for effective filtration and proper filter collection. Many hot tubs also feature an ozonizer, which naturally sterilizes and disinfects the water, thus reducing the use of maintenance products. The ozonizer is not an absolute must, however.

9 **The water heater.** To be effective, the electric water heater must have an output of 5.5 kilowatts. Two types of electric water heaters are available: those with an element inside the water and those with an element that does not come into contact with the water. According to experts, the latter offers the best quality, as there is no risk of the element being damaged by the water. Also, corrosion-resistant titanium water heaters are considered a good option.

THE COMFORT

The same seat will not offer the same comfort to someone who is six feet tall as it does to someone who is five feet tall. For this reason, shells with seats at varying heights are preferable. Some hot tubs feature jets that can be adjusted to meet individual needs. To choose a hot tub that's comfortable and best suited to you, first try each seat using the demonstration models available in-store. If you find yourself hesitating between two or three models, ask the dealer for a test run – yep, in a bathing suit, in the water. In doing so, you'll be able to tell if the jets can be adjusted to the required intensity and positioned in such a way as to massage your muscles and not your bones or your spine.

THE RETAILER

A hot tub is a long-term investment (good for about 20 years), and there's no reason you shouldn't shop around as you would for a car, visiting several retailers to compare products and prices. Err in favour of retailers who've been in business for a long time and offer good after-sales service, and for personalized service give priority to specialized stores. Also check if the retailer offers technical services and is open year-round. In the event of a breakdown during winter, you'll be glad that you're able to reach a qualified maintenance person.

COST AND WARRANTY

Expect to pay roughly $5,000 for a basic hot tub with a limited number of jets and the basic accessories. More sophisticated, superior-quality models start at $7,500. Before you decide on a model, carefully read the warranty on each component (they sometimes differ) and take the time to read all related documents, particularly the exclusions. Solid warranties on parts and especially labour are a good gauge of quality. Some retailers are pricier than others but offer a better warranty on labour.

INSTALLATION

A hot tub should be installed close to the house for quick access (approximately three metres), especially when it's below zero! A location sheltered from the wind (so the water won't freeze) and a fair distance from trees (to take advantage of solar energy) is considered optimal.

Also see to it that the desired location is able to support the weight of the hot tub and its occupants. (A tub with four occupants will weigh an average of more than 2,700 kilograms.) The ideal is to build it on a concrete slab. Interlocking stone and tile may also suffice, provided that they sit on a compacted stone dust surface measuring a minimum depth of 25 centimetres.

The electrical hookup must be carried out by a master electrician. Once this is done, all that's left to do is to fill the hot tub using the garden hose, pour in the starter kit (usually provided by the retailer) and enjoy!

MAINTENANCE

Chemically formulated products must be added periodically to preserve water quality, following the instructions provided. In general, two options are available: weekly-use bromine and daily-use lithium. Each disinfects the water, though bromine has the advantage of being soft on sensitive skin, while lithium is odourless and costs a little less. Regular water analysis is also a must. Ideally, the retailer should check it once a month (many offer this service free of charge), or you can check it yourself and confirm the results with the retailer. Other various components – the filtration system and the shell – also have to be maintained, in keeping with the manufacturer's care instructions, which should be read carefully. ☐

FIND A BUSINESS
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PHOTO: TRÉVI.

PHOTO: DAVID PAPAZIAN PHOTOGRAPHY INC./BRAND X/CORBIS.

Choosing Exterior Paint Colours

Give your home instant curb appeal and create a great – and lasting – first impression.

BY **MARTHA UNIACKE BREEN**

Your house is your public face; if you make a mistake when you paint the outside, the whole neighbourhood will see. And in terms of labour and cost, repainting the exterior is a far more involved proposition than painting a room. Fortunately, finding the perfect exterior colour scheme just means doing a little extra homework first.

There are some rules of thumb and a number of new resources to get you started. Many designers offer colour consultations at a reasonable fee or even specialize in this art; check the Yellow Pages™ or provincial interior design associations, or ask at a paint store. Also, some software is available (such as the General Paint "Virtual Decorator") that allows you to "paint" a room any colour offered so that you may more easily envision the end result. If you don't want to buy this software, some companies offer a similar service for a fee.

Whether you choose to consult professionals or rely on your own eye, colour designer Janice Lindsay of Pink, Colour + Design in Toronto says there's a big difference between interiors and exteriors: in a word, that difference is context. "It's not necessarily what you might like (in colour choice) – it's what goes with your neighbours' houses," she says.

DOS AND DON'TS

- Do test colours on bristol board. Outside light changes during the day and seasonally, and can dramatically affect a colour's appearance.
- Do consider neighbouring houses; your home is part of the overall streetscape.
- Don't use white as trim on a house with unpainted brick; it's outdated and artificial looking. Rich neutrals that complement the tone of the outer wall material enhance the building's natural beauty.
- Do paint trim white on a house whose exterior is a neutral or rich colour – it's a crisp, fresh look.
- Don't paint vinyl siding a much darker colour than its original shade – one or two shades darker is fine, but not more. Unlike metals and wood, which can accept any colour with the proper surface preparation and primer, the increased heat absorption of dark colours can cause vinyl to buckle or warp, ruining an expensive paint job.
- Don't paint your house yourself unless you're experienced; a professional job is worth the investment. ☐

FIND A BUSINESS
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STRUCTURAL PROJECTS

Feel the Warmth

Is your furnace on the fritz? Is your boiler about to blow? Here are some options to consider before your heating system calls it quits.

BY **ALLAN BRITNELL**

PHOTO: FIRSTLIGHT.

It's better to investigate replacement solutions before your furnace kicks the bucket, so here's a look at the most common heating systems available in Canada.

Flextherm heated floors keep feet warm and don't generate electromagnetic field emissions.

FORCED-AIR FURNACE

Two-thirds of all Canadian homes are heated with forced-air furnaces. Of these, two-thirds are fired by natural gas, while the rest are fired by oil or propane. These systems are popular for a number of reasons, notably their ability to heat the house quickly and the fact that their ductwork can also be used for air conditioning during the summer months. In addition, a forced-air furnace can be equipped to multi-task as an air filter, humidifier and/or fresh-air ventilator. The downside of forced-air systems is that it can feel drafty because of the air blowing out of the vents, which also may circulate dust. Ducts can carry noise from the furnace and blower throughout the house. If your furnace is more than a dozen years old, chances are it's a conventional model with an annual fuel utilization efficiency (AFUE) of only 60 to 65 percent. This means that for every dollar you spend on fuel, 35¢ to 40¢ goes up the chimney in the form of exhaust gases. Since 1995, the minimum efficiency level for furnaces sold in Canada has been set at 78 percent.

Currently, there are two types of furnaces on the market. The first type is called "mid-efficiency," and they are models that are about 80-percent efficient. These units have a combustion chamber located below a heat exchanger that warms air that the blower circulates through heating ducts. The

SALES TAX REBATE

The government of Ontario offers provincial retail sales tax (RST) rebates on the purchase of residential wind, solar, micro-hydroelectric or geothermal energy systems until December 31, 2009. For detailed information or to claim the sales tax rebate, contact the nearest Ontario Ministry of Finance Tax Office listed under Taxes – Provincial (Retail) Sales Tax in the blue pages of your telephone directory, or call the TAX FAX Service at 1-877-482-9329 or visit the Ministry of Finance website at www.rev.gov.on.ca.

Electric convector wall heaters like the one shown here are very popular.

A TWO-STAGE VALVE WILL ALLOW YOUR FORCED-AIR FURNACE TO RUN IN LOW GEAR THE MAJORITY OF THE TIME, FOR BETTER COMFORT AND EFFICIENCY.

lighter-than-air combustion gases are expelled through your chimney. The second category of furnaces are known as "high-efficiency" or "condensing" and range from 90- to 98-percent AFUE. A condensing furnace is a regular furnace with a built-in heat recycler that draws the maximum amount of heat from the flue gases before they exit through the chimney. In the process, these gases cool to the point that they condense – thus the name.

The price of a mid-efficiency furnace for a typical home may be about $1,000 cheaper than a comparable high-efficiency model, but you can only make an accurate cost comparison by calculating the operating expenses over the lifetime of the furnace – typically 15 to 20 years. A 10-percent difference in your monthly gas bill can quickly add up to the initial price difference between the two, particularly if fuel prices rise. But by next year this will be a moot point: Mid-efficiency models are being phased out at the end of 2009.

More research and development goes into forced-air furnaces than other heating systems (a result of their market dominance) so they benefit from the most technological advancements. Some innovations are now standard, such as electric ignition, which has long since replaced pilot lights. Other refinements get bundled in as you move up the price list of new furnaces.

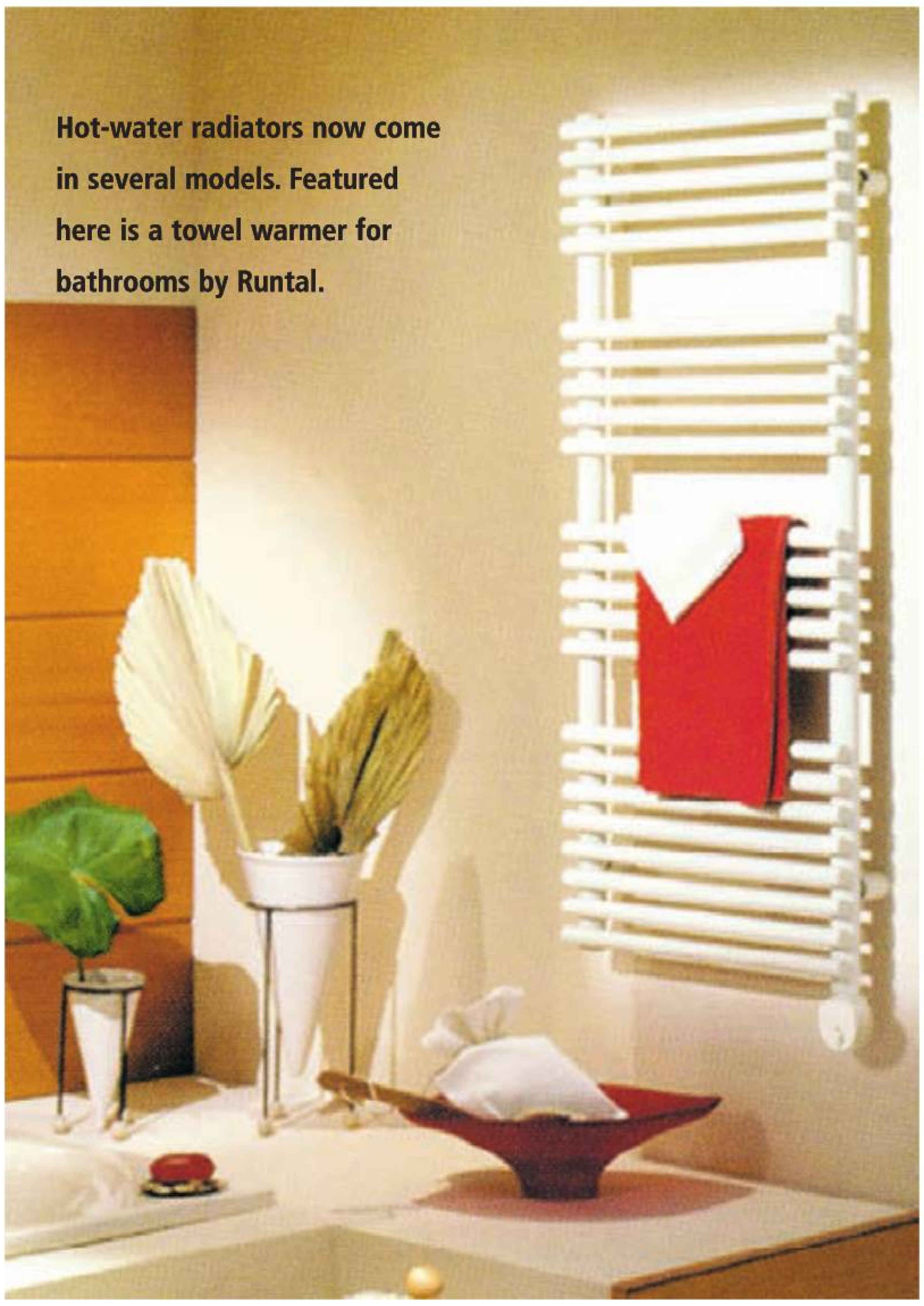
A standard furnace has a single-stage gas valve. Every time your furnace turns on, it runs at peak capacity. The alternative is to upgrade to a two-stage valve, which enables your furnace to "think like a small furnace," says Dave Walton, director of home ideas for Direct Energy. Two-stage furnaces run in low gear the majority of the time. They only kick into the second stage on the coldest days. This allows the system to run longer heating cycles at, typically, half the total capacity of the furnace and prevents temperature swings, providing better comfort and efficiency to the system.

Another upgrade is the variable-speed fan blower, which runs at a lower speed almost continuously, thus reducing energy consumption and noise. The variable-speed fan will do the same job for your central air conditioner.

FURNACE UPGRADES

■ Maintaining a humidity level of 35 to 45 percent inside your home reduces static buildup, moderates shrinking and swelling of wood floors and prevents dry skin and a scratchy throat. Whole-house humidifiers that are mounted on a furnace can be either passive (when the air passes through a water-filled filter) or active (when a fan forces air through a water-saturated pad). Both styles require occasional cleaning and an annual replacement of the evaporator pad. ■ Forced-air furnaces come equipped with only a one-inch thick air filter. For optimal air quality (and to protect the secondary heat exchanger on condensing furnaces), upgrade to a mechanical or electronic air cleaner. ■ Unlike their drafty, elderly neighbours, new energy-efficient (R-2000) homes require a mechanical ventilation system that exchanges stale air for fresh air. A heat recovery ventilator (HRV) recycles heat from the exhaust air to warm the incoming fresh air, reducing the overall energy demand. ■ Setback thermostats can be programmed to lower the temperature while you're asleep or at work and raise it back up to your comfort level before you get out of bed or back home. Natural Resources Canada estimates a two-percent saving on your heating bill for every degree you lower the heat.

PHOTO: NICOLAS RUEL.



Hot-water radiators now come in several models. Featured here is a towel warmer for bathrooms by Runtal.

ELECTRIC HEATING

Electric heat is the second most popular option in the country. More often than not, electric heat is generated in baseboards and in recessed floor- or wall-mounted heaters. It's unique in that it is considered to be 100-percent efficient – all the energy consumed by the heaters is converted to heat.

For homeowners, the big draw to this form of heating is the low initial cost of the system. You can buy a thousand-watt baseboard heater with enough power to heat a small room for less than $40 and the price increases with sleeker, space-saving designs and enhancements such as circulating fans. A general guideline is that you need eight to 10 watts per square foot.

If you're considering electric heat, you should take long-term operating costs into account. Depending on the size and condition of your house, heating electrically can cost hundreds of dollars a year more than running a mid- or high-efficiency natural-gas furnace. That said, electric heat can be a cost-effective, supplemental system, and it can also provide enhanced comfort, as is the case with electric heating cables installed beneath bathroom floor tiles.

HOT-WATER HEATING

Hydronic heating systems use hot water or steam to provide warmth. In older urban homes, this usually includes a boiler with hot-water radiators in each room. While the basic equipment has not radically changed over the years, there has been some technological advancement. More efficient fuel pumps and burners, automatic dampers and circulating pumps have boosted boiler efficiency levels from around 60-percent AFUE to a current minimum of 80 percent for models sold on today's market.

ONE PIECE OF EQUIPMENT YOU SHOULD HAVE WITH ANY GAS, OIL OR WOOD-BASED HEATING SYSTEM IS A CARBON MONOXIDE DETECTOR. HOW MANY OTHER $50 ITEMS CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE?

The machinery is changing too. Condensing boilers with a secondary heat exchanger (and an AFUE of up to 95 percent), popular in Europe, are now available in Canada. Smaller, baseboard-style radiators that take up less living space than the old cast-iron units are also gaining popularity. One form of hydronic heating that is becoming more popular is floor radiant heating. With this type of system, a boiler or hot-water tank warms the water that runs through pipes that have been installed beneath the floor. You can heat an entire house this way or use it to supplement your existing system to provide additional warmth in selected rooms, such as the kitchen or the bathroom.

THE BOTTOM LINE

If you do need to change your heating system, cost will probably be a major consideration. The federal government ecoENERGY program (www.oee.nrcan.gc.ca) offers homeowners thousands of dollars in rebates for undertaking energy efficiency renovations (including up to $500 for upgrading your furnace). The program is supplemented in Ontario with a matching dollar-for-dollar provincial government Home Energy Retrofit Program. Various utilities also offer rebates and incentives on, for example, the installation of a programmable thermostat. ☐

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PHOTO: CORBIS.

The Eco-Friendly Flame

There's nothing like a fireplace or a wood stove to make a room cozy. And clean combustion technology offers a variety of options for people intent on fanning their own eco-flames.

BY **SÉVERINE GALUS**

NEW GENERATION OF WOOD-BURNING APPLIANCES

Wood is a renewable resource as long as forestry harvesting does not exceed forestry growth. As a fuel, wood is eco-friendly only if used in conjunction with a high-efficiency appliance or stove certified by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or CSA International. Certified units are designed to reduce emissions of particle pollutants to a minimum both inside and outside the home.

According to Environment Canada, clean combustion technology reduces pollution to a level varying between two grams and five grams per hour (or 0.8 grams for the most effective units), compared to 25 grams to 50 grams for non-certified units. In other words, in a span of just nine hours on average the traditional wood stove will send the same amount of particles into the atmosphere as an eco-certified model does in 60 hours. Wood, however, does not contribute to global warming in the same way that a fossil fuel like gasoline does. According to Environment Canada, burning wood only emits the same amount of carbon dioxide – a greenhouse gas – as wood left to decompose in the forest does.

As well, EPA-certified units offer an average wood-burning efficiency of 68 percent (up to 90 percent for the top models) compared to 54 percent for non-certified traditional models. Higher energy efficiency helps to reduce wood consumption by 25 percent to 33 percent, as well as heating costs, forestry harvest, greenhouse gases and pollution in general.

ADVANCED COMBUSTION VERSUS CATALYTIC COMBUSTION

There are two categories of high-efficiency wood stoves: those that use advanced combustion and those that use catalytic combustion. Advanced combustion appliances feature a second combustion chamber where pollutants are burned. With catalytic stoves, combustion gases are sent to a catalytic filter, where the pollutants are destroyed. While catalytic stoves are more effective and eco-friendly than advanced combustion models, they're also more expensive, since the catalyzer needs to be replaced every two years at a cost of roughly $400 each time.

PRACTICAL PELLETS

Pellet stoves burn wood in the form of small round pellets measuring roughly 6 millimetres in diameter and 25 millimetres in length. The pellets are made of compressed wood residue. The principal selling point of a pellet wood stove is its convenience: Once the hopper is loaded with pellets, the

Ethanol fireplace, Ecosmart.

fire can burn for up to 24 hours, requiring no care since the feed is automatic. Most appliances come with a thermostat as well, which makes it possible to reach the exact desired temperature. (Try stopping a traditional wood stove at 20°C!) Some models can even be programmed to start automatically, which is great for those cold mornings when you don't want to crawl out from under the covers.

Other than its convenience, the pellet stove offers vastly superior combustion efficiency, transforming 80 percent of the fuel into heat and consequently emitting a minimal amount of particle pollutants (less than one gram per hour). However, the motors that circulate the air and evacuate combustion gases run on electricity, although some models can run on a battery in the event of a power outage. But this doesn't do much for the pellet stove's image as an eco-friendly appliance. As well, it's important to consider how much energy is used in manufacturing the pellets themselves.

While pellet stoves are quite expensive, they don't require a high-temperature chimney, as do wood stoves. With some models, the installation of an outdoor vent is all that's needed.

IS GAS REALLY THAT CLEAN?

Energy-efficient (up to 90 percent), clean (they don't pollute like wood stoves and don't produce ash) and practical (they include programmable thermostats), gas appliances have the added advantage that they don't call for a chimney: A simple outdoor vent or vent pipe (much like that of a dryer) will do. Gas fireplaces have everything the consumer can ask for. Better still, manufacturers have worked hard to produce an appliance with a flame almost as attractive as that of a real wood fire. However, these so-called "commercial" advantages belie the fact that gas heating systems present certain inconveniences when it comes to energy efficiency.

While natural gas and propane produce less carbon monoxide and particle emissions than wood, each is still a non-renewable source of fossil energy. Extraction, refining, transportation and fossil energy combustion of this resource all definitely leave an environmental footprint. When burned, natural gas and propane produce mainly nitrogen oxides (which contribute to smog) and carbon dioxide (a greenhouse gas). They also release a great deal of moisture into the air.

As already mentioned, some gas appliances are up to 90-percent efficient. However, Natural Resources Canada cautions that this rate corresponds to the maximum efficiency reached in controlled laboratory settings, where the usual sources of heat loss are non-existent. The best way to determine the real efficiency of a gas appliance is to consult the EnerGuide for its efficiency rating. Testing in connection with this Canadian standard has shown that, among these appliances, the top models only operate at an efficiency rate somewhere between 30 percent and 70 percent, results far lower than those obtained in laboratory settings.

The widescreen gas fireplace by Town & Country has arrived.

■ ETHANOL

Ethanol is derived from the fermentation of sugars contained in certain vegetables, including beets and sugar cane, some grains, such as wheat and corn, and potatoes. Ethanol fuel, therefore, is a clean and renewable energy source. Instead of emitting smoke or particle pollutants, its combustion releases only water vapour. Consequently, ethanol is used for gas fireplaces, which don't need a chimney flue. An ethanol fireplace can be placed anywhere in the household and used as a piece of furniture, in keeping with its primary use as a mood appliance. However, with a heating capacity of 9,000 BTUs to 13,000 BTUs (depending on the model), it will only heat a space of roughly 46 square metres, at a cost of three 890-millilitre containers of ethanol (at roughly $10 each), enough to last an average of three hours. Which raises the question: How can an appliance be deemed eco-friendly when its sole purpose is to give pleasure (the pleasure of gazing at a flame) and the fuel it uses is so expensive to produce? □

ECO-FRIENDLY LOGS

Whether they're made up of wood residue or spent coffee grounds, the so-called "eco-friendly" synthetic fireplace logs are said to produce fewer atmospheric pollutants than natural wood. Dry and dense, they burn more efficiently, producing less smoke and therefore generate few toxic by-products. They also boast other eco-friendly virtues: They recover industrial sawdust as well as spent coffee grounds from restaurants, waste products that would otherwise end up in municipal dumps and produce greenhouse gases as they decompose. The use of synthetic logs also reduces the number of trees that are cut down. On the other hand, synthetic fireplace logs manufacture greenhouse gases, just as natural logs do.

But, in fact, the principal eco-friendly thing about synthetic logs is that they're made of residue. What's more, some logs are ignited while still inside their glossy packaging. Burning any packaging of this kind is highly ill-advised, as the glossy paper contains paraffin and various kinds of residue. Even worse, these reconstituted logs tend to break apart easily, increasing the flame's surface area and overheating the heating appliances. Some manufacturers, therefore, prohibit the use of synthetic logs in their appliances out of a concern with overheating and the potential damages resulting from it. Paraffin-based firelogs in particular give off so much heat that they can only be used in traditional open fireplaces.

TO FIND OUT MORE

- **The Ontario Association of Certified Engineering Technicians and Technologists (OACETT): www.oacett.org**
- **Office of Energy Efficiency: www.oee.nrcan.gc.ca**
- **Natural Resources Canada: www.nrcan.gc.ca**

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BEFORE

Fantastic Facade

The exterior of your house is just as important as the inside.

BY **KAREN KIRK**

It was the enviable location, the grand canopy of mature trees and the impressive lot size that sold interior designer Wendy Reimer and her husband, Ross, on their classic Oakville, Ont., home more than 15 years ago. Over the years, they have updated the interior, landscaped the backyard and most recently with the help of a local architect and landscaper refreshed the dated facade and gardens.

"We always felt that the exterior of the house was lacking some serious character," says Reimer. "The goal was to create a more balanced look to the home's architecture." Improvements were made using natural architectural materials to restore beauty and longevity to the house. Even though she specializes exclusively in designing interiors, Reimer hopes to inspire readers with her talent for creating her home's beautiful exterior.

PHOTOS: DONNA GRIFFITH.

1. SHUTTERS Paying more attention to detail and proportion, Reimer replaced the shutters with wider-panelled, custom-made ones. "They don't make shutters wide enough," she says. "Shutters should appear to be functional even if they're not."

2. WINDOWS All windows were replaced with double-hung wood windows that flip down inside the house for easy exterior cleaning. For added character, new trim was added to each window to create sills.

3. SIDING The existing siding was replaced with natural cedar shake siding. "So that we could have years of maintenance-free beauty, I had every piece of cedar hand-dipped in Benjamin Moore Wood Siding Finish in an alkyd solid colour (HC-28 Shelburne Buff) and laid out to dry before installing them on the house," says Reimer.

4. BRICK Wendy and Ross always liked the aged character and colour of the original brick on the lower portion of the house, so they kept it, matching the cedar shingles and trim colour to the brick.

5. LIGHTING Exterior lighting fixtures were replaced with custom coach lights in an aged bronze finish.

6. PORTICO To further define the tasteful architectural character of the house, a portico was built over the front door featuring two square panelled columns in the front and two matching half-columns against the house. The roof of the portico features a bead-board ceiling trimmed with crown moulding, copper flashing and recessed halogen lighting. A unique custom-built wood railing added the finishing touch.

7. GARAGE Custom wood garage doors with bead-board and paned-glass-window detailing complement the refined look of the house. A matching coach light between the doors and a custom cupola with copper roof and finial add classic details. □

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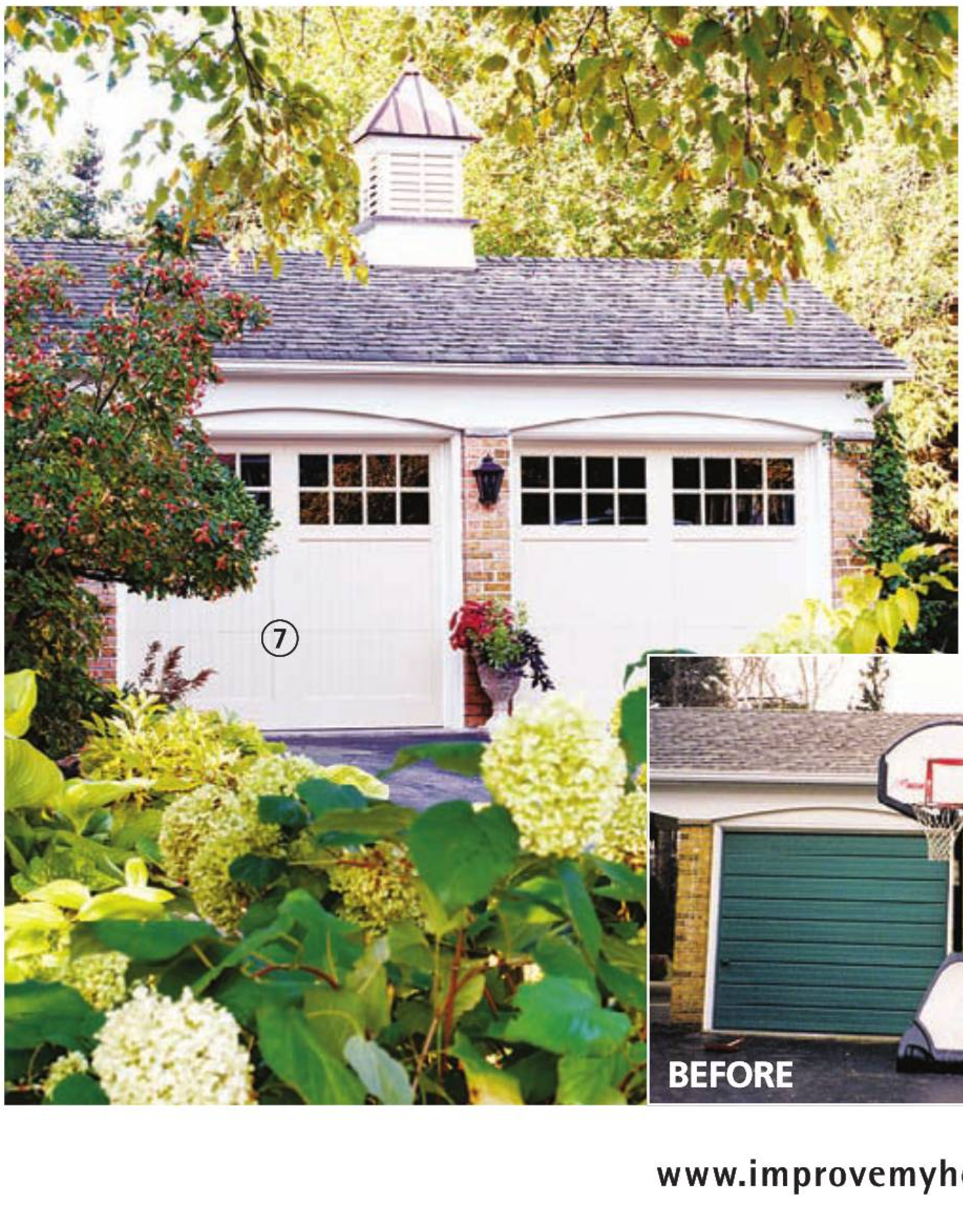

BEFORE

When doing renovations on your home, you can reduce your environmental footprint considerably.

PHOTO: © PAPA.GRAPHICS/AMANAIMAGES/CORBIS.

Operation Green Home!

A "green" home consumes less water and energy and contains fewer pollutants. Here are some tips on "greening" yours.

BY **ANICK PERREAULT-LABELLE**

MAXIMUM INSULATION

- Slowly tour the house with a candle in your hand: If the flame flickers, chances are there's a draft! Pay special attention to the trap door leading to the attic, the edges of the windows and doors and the openings through which cables, vents and plumbing are passed. Then block off all of the openings you discover.
- Insulate the walls and roof with natural products. Cellulose, essentially composed of used newspaper, is a better choice than polystyrene. It's renewable and recyclable, whereas polystyrene is a petroleum derivative. However, installing cellulose insulation is more complicated and requires special equipment.
- Through the Ontario Home Energy Retrofit Program, the Ontario Ministry of Energy offers grants of up to $5,000 to homeowners intent on retrofitting their homes to make them more energy efficient. This is in addition to the maximum $5,000 grant available through the federal government's ecoENERGY Retrofit Program. The Ontario Home Energy Audit Program also allows homeowners to find out how and where their home is losing energy. With this program, homeowners are able to identify improvements that can be made to home heating, cooling and hot-water systems, helping them save hundreds of dollars per year. The government of Ontario pays 50 percent – up to $150 – of the home-energy audit. For details on the Home Energy Retrofit Program and the Home Energy Audit Program, go to www.homeenergyontario.ca, and on the ecoENERGY Retrofit Program, visit www.oee.nrcan.gc.ca.

AIRTIGHT DOORS AND WINDOWS

- In the wintertime, install transparent plastic window covering. The air trapped between the window and the plastic acts as insulation if it fills a space measuring at least three to four centimetres.
- If you change your windows, opt for casement or awning models, which open, respectively, like a door or the trunk of a car. Casement and awning windows are more airtight than both double-hung or sliding windows, where the first pane of glass slides over the other. As well, opt for double- or triple-pane windows rather than single-pane windows. The air (or argon) between the panes acts as a natural insulation. Windows with low-emissivity glazing are also a good option: They are covered with a thin metallic layer, invisible to the naked eye, which keeps the heat inside during the winter and outside in the summer.

Pellicule Energy Film

- Think twice about purchasing glass doors, which do not insulate as effectively as their steel or wooden counterparts. The same goes for polyvinyl chloride (PVC) doors: While they insulate well against cold, they emit chlorine when exposed to ultraviolet rays.

THE MOEN FINA COLLECTION combines line and function, and it meets the water conservation requirements of the Environmental Protection Agency: The aerator reduces water consumption from 8.8 litres to six litres a minute.

LESS WATER WASTED

- If you plan on changing your toilet, you might want to consider a dual-flush style. These models use three or six litres of water to empty the toilet bowl rather than the standard 13 litres.
- Two devices help to reduce water consumption: Tap aerators decrease the volume of water used, while a flow switch between the shower head and the water pipe serves to interrupt the flow of water for a short time while you lather up.

ECO-RENOVATIONS

- To use construction material that is eco-friendly, find out where it comes from, how it was produced, to what extent it is sustainable, whether it is recyclable and what kind of maintenance it requires. For example, if the product comes from halfway across the world, you can bet that its transportation required a great deal of energy that, in turn, generated a considerable amount of greenhouse gases. Plastic, for its part, is a petroleum-based product and, as such, is non-renewable and difficult to recycle.
- Traditional particleboard should be avoided, as it is manufactured using a glue containing urea formaldehyde, a toxic compound. It also emits volatile organic compounds (VOC), which contribute to smog. Eco-friendly alternatives include plywood, which contains less glue, or particleboard with a soy-based adhesive that is formaldehyde-free. If you must use panels containing formaldehyde, seal all of the rough surfaces with a coat of water-based paint to trap the pollutants.
- Opt for wood products certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) to support the responsible management of forests. FSC-approved wooden floors, planks or doors are available in many stores. To find a retailer that carries FSC-approved wood products, go to www.fsccanada.org and click on “Find FSC-Certified Wood Products” and then “Retailers.”
- Avoid floor coverings made from petroleum-based products such as vinyl, as well as olefin- or polypropylene-based carpets. Eco-friendly options include natural materials such as ceramic, bamboo, hardwood or linoleum, which do not emit VOCs. They are also longer lasting and recyclable. Carpets made of natural fibres such as sisal, wool or coconut are also sound options. In terms of cost and maintenance, they are on a par with other types of carpets. Natural-fibre carpets are available in home-decoration stores and some hardware stores.
- Recycle construction-site waste so as not to overload landfills. For guidelines on the recycling and recovery of construction waste and for a directory of recycling resources, visit the Recycling Council of Ontario website at www.rco.on.ca. □

TO FIND OUT MORE

***Healthy Housing*, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca.**

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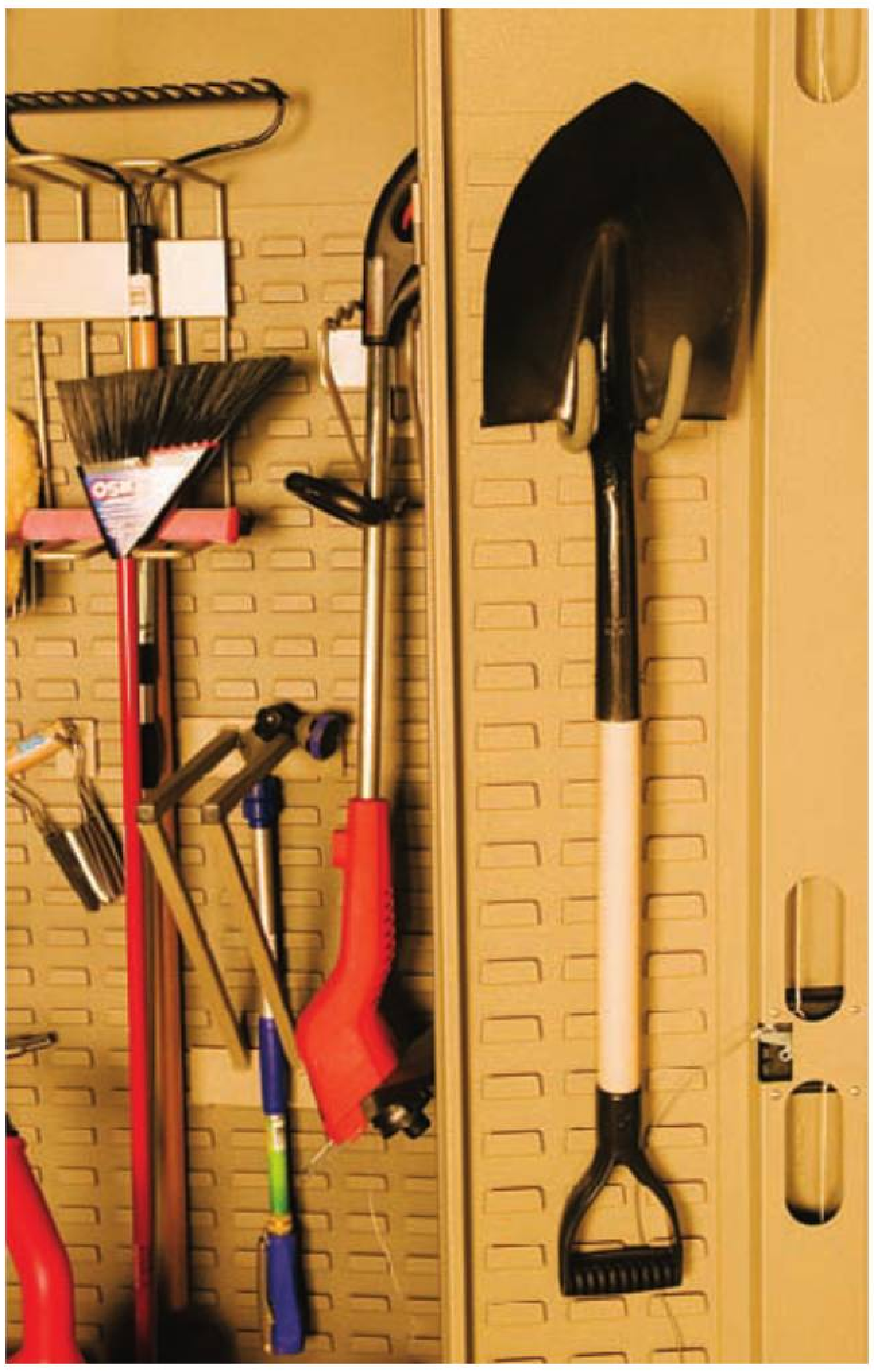

Evolution, modular systems made of welded industrial steel. This line was inspired by aeronautics and automobile mechanics. Thermofused cabinets, 5/8-inch thickness for the back, sides and doors and one inch for the top and the shelves. Brushed aluminum finish. (Urban Garage)

New Possibilities for the Home Garage

The latest trend? A garage that gets used as much as the rest of the house!

BY **MYRIAM GAGNON**

In the past four or five years, the concept of the multi-functional garage has gained favour in the United States. Now, Canadians are catching on. Since most garages adjoining a home are already insulated and heated, homeowners are now asking how they can optimize that space, which often spans more than 27 square metres. While preserving its primary use as a carport and storage space, the garage can also serve as a workshop, a games-and-fitness room, a laundry room and storage space

Schulte, modular hanging system, with 58-cm x 100-cm steel grids. (Space Solutions)

for extra food. It can even be used for family gatherings and teen evenings in lieu of the basement, which nowadays is often the designated home-theatre space.

Layout, it goes without saying, plays a fundamental role. No one wants to dance with friends or jump on the treadmill amid a jumble of cardboard boxes, ski boots, construction materials and garden hoses. The word from professionals is that the catch-all storage garage will soon be a thing of the past. Today, in some cases, garage design practically falls more aptly under decoration. Many clients are asking for the same type of melamine storage cabinets they have in their dressing rooms or kitchens. But there's a hitch: While making the garage habitable, you still need to have a practical and usable space that is also well ordered and attractive. A lot of companies are seeing their client base grow with each passing month. And this is just the beginning. Chances are that within a few years, the finished garage will be spoken of in the same breath as the walk-in closet.

STORAGE, STORAGE AND MORE STORAGE

The key to transforming a garage that is used just for storage into a multi-functional room lies in freeing up the floor space by moving most stored items onto the walls and ceiling. Garage design these days is a byword for closed cabinets. With the explosion of the garage-design market, the availability of products specifically intended for the residential garage has expanded by leaps and bounds. Today's modules come in an assortment of forms and dimensions, making it possible to choose a wide variety of configurations. Stable, resistant, compact and customized to meet personal requirements, the modules feature adjustable shelves and drawers capable of handling heavy loads. The good news for decorators is that these new models are practical and attractive. Between a Formula One mechanic's workshop look and a high-tech kitchen one with integrated lighting and washtub, these modules are available in hardwood or steel and in a large range of colours and finishes. Prices vary accordingly. And a wall in Ferrari red or with stainless steel cabinets will lend your garage a certain cachet. You won't be shy about leaving the garage door open!

BaldHead, galvanized steel cabinets, height-adjustable legs (from five centimetres to 20 centimetres), glossy or matte finish, custom-built stainless steel doors. (Garage Living)

Obviously, a garage is still a garage. Tools and equipment should be easy to locate, which is where wall-mounted systems come into play. These systems have brackets and racks meant to hold everything from hedge-trimmers, fishing rods and tennis racquets to kayaks and stepladders. And with grid-based hanging systems, perforated panels or board panels, there's no shortage of dimensions, materials and finishes to choose from. On the issue of look and convenience, specialists recommend that objects and materials be grouped by category – leisure activities, do-it-yourself, car maintenance and gardening – with the messiest items (garbage bins, lawn mower, snow blower) closest to the garage door and the cleanest areas (laundry, food supplies) located beside the door leading into the house.

Bulky objects and seasonal items can be hung from the ceiling, though wall-mounted U-rails may be sufficient. Those who dream of having a garage where guests can be entertained may prefer to invest in industrial storage cabinets, which combine performance with practicality. Though the sturdiest models must be installed by a professional, they can easily handle up to 270 kilograms of, for example, plastic storage containers for those thousands of items that would otherwise clutter up the floor. But don't forget to identify their contents with stickers to avoid complete confusion. And remember to invite the neighbours to the housewarming party! □

RESOURCES

- **Garage Living, www.garageliving.ca, 1-877-850-8557**
- **Urban Garage, www.urbangarage.ca, 416-792-7533**
- **1st Choice Garage Outfitters, www.1stchoicegarage.com, 905-264-9111**
- **Space Solutions, www.spacesolutions.ca, 416-322-5575**

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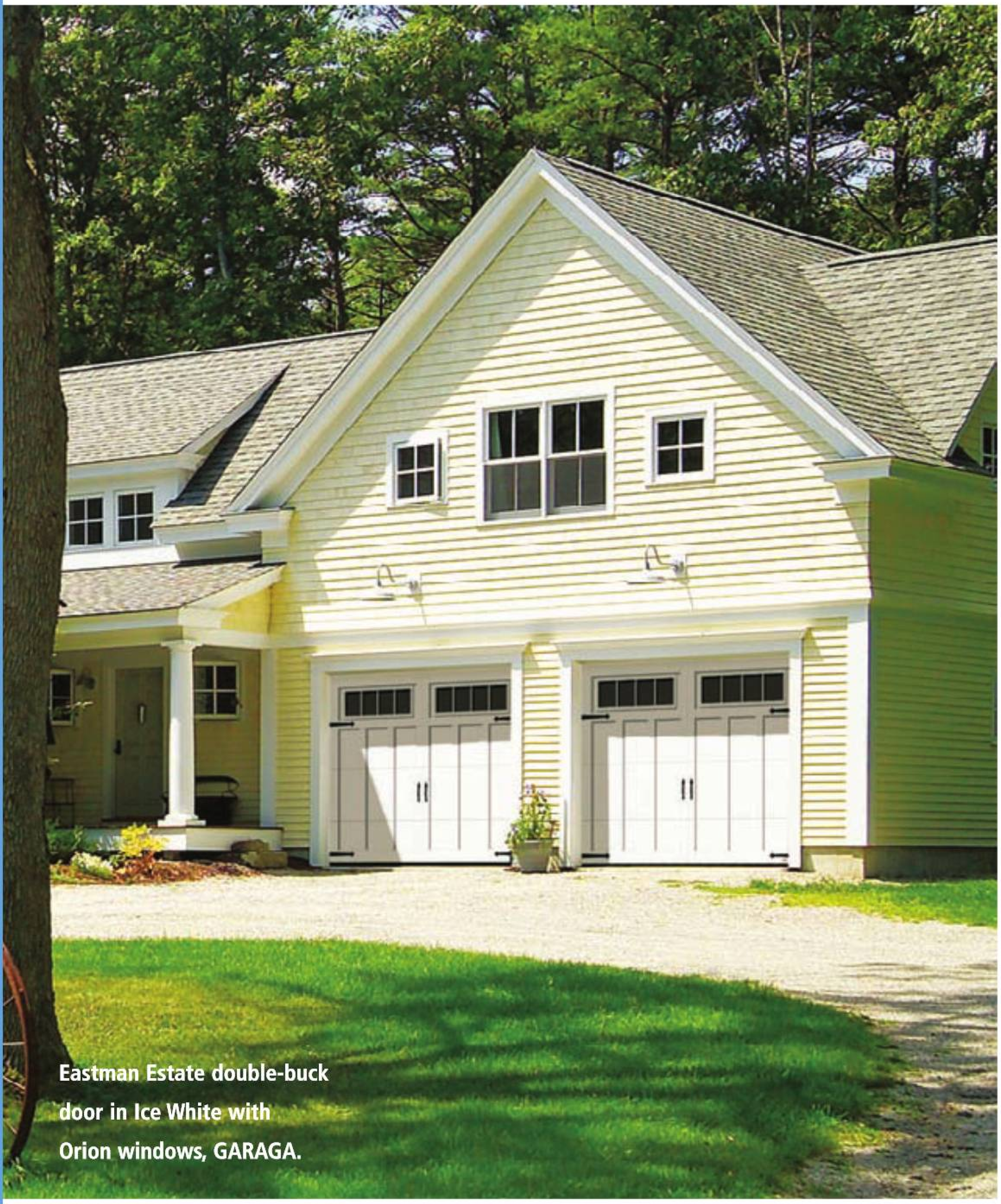
How to Pick the Right Garage Door

The garage door has become such a prominent part of the facade of new homes that manufacturers now offer more styles and more colour choices than ever before.

BY **MARTHA UNIACKE BREEN**



Eastman Estate double-buck door in Ice White with Orion windows, GARAGA.

DECIDE ON THE MATERIAL

When researching your options, there's a lot to think about: durability, maintenance, design, cost. "Wood doors can take more abuse than steel ones, which show dings and dents, can even be pierced and can rust," says Francesco Di Sarra of Capoferro Design Build Group in Toronto. "The most commonly used wood is cedar, but you can get anything you want if you have the budget, even mahogany." There's also the question of aesthetics. "I like to match the style to the house windows," says Eric Adelman of the Toronto custom-design company South Park Design Build. "For wood and stone houses, I might stain the garage door. The idea is to blend it into the façade. With contemporary homes, you can go crazy with door materials – like glass – and interesting wood designs."

■ **Aluminum** ■ Many styles, stock colours and designs ■ Low to no maintenance ■ Rustproof, making it a good choice for salty or humid environments ■ The lightweight material is less taxing on the operating mechanism, door openers and tracks, not to mention easier to operate manually. ■ Less durable than steel; dents easily

Eastman Estate X-Buck door in Desert Sand with arch windows, GARAGA.

■ **Steel** ■ Astonishing variety of styles, stock colours and finishes ■ Sturdier than aluminum ■ Can rust if dented or scratched

■ **Wood** ■ The traditionalist's choice; a range of options for custom design ■ Veneers or overlays offer the look of wood at a lower cost ■ Requires regular maintenance (painting or staining)

■ **Fibreglass/PVC overlay** ■ Wide choice of styles and designs ■ More durable than wood and metal, but can crack if hit hard ■ Newer to the market so not as widely available as wood and metal ■ Generally costs more than metal but less than solid wood

CHOOSE FINISHING DETAILS TO CUSTOMIZE YOUR LOOK AND TO ADD CHARACTER

Design choices aren't limited to the basic door itself. Many manufacturers offer decorative accents and hardware.

■ **Panelling** Options include multiple square or rectangular sections for creating everything from a colonial to a coach-house look.

■ **Decorative hardware** Hinges and handles come in a variety of designs, including a forged-iron look to evoke the styling of a coach house or stable doors.

■ **Decorative strapping** An X or Z shape formed with strapping (and perhaps in a contrasting colour) can introduce a nostalgic country or barn door look.

■ **Windows** Styles include arch tops, divided lights, large panels and etched glass; textured and sandblasted styles are also available for less transparency.

DETERMINE THE STYLE THAT BEST SUITS YOUR HOME

Choose a door to complement the architecture. "On a traditional house, you might want the door to disappear or blend in. But if your home is modern, you can celebrate that by choosing all glass or a unique design," says Di Sarra. Here are some general guidelines on door styles and features that will match your house type.

Gallery series garage door with wrought-iron inserts by Clopay, HOME DEPOT.

■ **Victorian/Georgian/colonial** ■ Panelled wood (look-alikes) ■ Coach house or stable look ■ Divided-light windows, ideally coordinated with house windows ■ Decorative hardware, like iron hinges or handles

■ **Arts & crafts/Edwardian** ■ Raised panels or sections ■ Arch-top or divided-light windows to match or complement your home's windows (but avoid anything too fussy)

■ **'50s ranch style** ■ Plain finish with simple, horizontal design emphasis like wood slats or banding ■ Simple hardware or windows that create balance with overall composition of the home's exterior ■ For a streamlined look, consider forgoing the handles

■ **Contemporary/modern** ■ This style offers the most design freedom – choose materials and details that make a statement ■ Options to consider: stained wood, V-ribbed or horizontal banding, frosted or pebbled glass

PICK THE RIGHT COLOUR

Generally, the door's colour should complement your home and blend in with the overall structure rather than stand out. Avoid vivid colours and extreme contrasts. Consider matching the garage door to the window trim rather than to the front door. Or go for a colour that blends in with your siding or brick. For less contrast with red brick, choose a beige or tan that matches the mortar in the brick, instead of a white.

Elite wood-look door in Cherry with wood-grain-embossed prefinished steel exterior, RICHARDS-WILCOX CANADA

OPTIONS FOR CONVENIENCE AND COMFORT

■ **Installation** "Make sure the door is properly installed and maintained," says Bette Davies, of Richards-Wilcox, a manufacturer based in Mississauga. "Installation isn't a regulated profession yet. For safety reasons, use a reputable company that carries a recognized door brand."

■ **Insulation** The higher the R-value of the door's insulated core, the more protection from noise and the elements. "Garage use is changing. For a lot of people now, it's not just a place for your car, but a workshop or even extra living space," says Jean-François Morin of Garaga. "So people are asking for increased insulation – R14 or more – and better weatherstripping to make it more comfortable." If you use your garage as a workspace, or have a living space over or attached to it, consider a higher R-value to save energy and increase comfort.

■ **Safety** Most automatic door openers retract if they sense an obstruction, but you might also want finger guards to prevent pinched fingers. Also, hire a professional installer – steel doors especially can be dangerous if they fall.

■ **Door openers** While a 1/2-horsepower opener will operate all but the largest and heaviest door, it may not last as long as a 3/4-horsepower model. At the higher end, in-line openers dispense with chains and have fewer moving parts, so they make less noise. "Some newer automatic openers include a track drive that uses a nylon track and is quieter," says Philip Coleman of RONA Home & Garden. ☐

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SPECIALIZE IN CUSTOM HOMES & RENOVATIONS
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PHOTO: GOODSHOOT/CORBIS.

When Choosing a Contractor... Don't Get Scammed

It's usually difficult – and expensive – to get your money back after you've been ripped off. That's why it's essential to do your homework before you hire someone to work on your home.

BY **ALLAN BRITNELL**

SCAMS 101

The lowest of the low are the fly-by-night scammers who solicit a few hundred dollars for small jobs such as eavestrough cleaning or driveway sealing. Unsolicited roof repairs are another common ploy. Someone comes by and says something like "I'm in the neighbourhood doing roofing. I have stuff left over and it looks like your roof could use some work." Or, "I'll give you a deal. All I need is $300 up front and I'll go get the materials." They take that $300 and are never seen again.

Deposits cashed for work that's never done and the failure to finish jobs are among the most common complaints filed about renovators. While you can never be entirely sure that someone is on the up and up, there are steps you can take to avoid the bad apples.

FINDING THE RIGHT CONTRACTOR

Word-of-mouth references are best – at least you'll know one satisfied customer. For any renovation, large or small, you should get a minimum of three estimates. You should be wary of a jack of all trades (master of none) contractor. For a multifaceted job, such as a kitchen or bathroom renovation, you ideally want to work with multiple subcontractors who specialize in trades like plumbing, wiring, tiling or drywall.

Ask for a detailed written estimate (a number quickly scribbled on the back of a business card doesn't count), preferably on company stationery. The business information on it will help with background checks; the specifics will help you compare apples to apples. When getting an estimate for a deck, for example, make sure that all contractors price out using the same materials and size and a comparable layout. Query any who are significantly higher or lower than others for an explanation: What services and materials are they including or leaving out? Finally, don't make a choice based solely on the lowest price. Remember the old adage: If it sounds too good to be true, it most probably is.

BACKGROUND CHECK

Once you've chosen a company you think you might want to use, there are a few more steps you need to take before signing a contract. It may seem like a lot of work, but it can save you aggravation down the road. Start by asking to see photos of recent work and for customer references to check. Of course, no company is going to give out the number of an irate customer as a reference. But if any of the contacts they do give are less than totally satisfied with the job they did, you should take that as a warning. If you have the time, try to visit the site of a work in progress.

If there's a Better Business Bureau (BBB) in your area, give it a call. Many people don't realize that the BBB keeps records of complaints made against member companies. With one quick call, you can learn if a business has had grievances lodged against it.

As well, check with your local municipal licencing office to verify that the contractor has a valid operating licence. Some trades, such as plumbers, electricians and HVAC installers, require specialized licences. You can verify with their trade association or provincial labour ministry that they're fully qualified.

You may also want to check with your provincial business licencing office to verify that the company is formally registered. In Ontario, you can conduct a business name search through the Ministry of Consumer and Business Services ($12 in person/$8 online) and get an instant report on the

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- **How long have you been in business?**
- **What kind of work do you specialize in? (Keep in mind that the true meaning of "specialize" is not an open-ended shopping list.)**
- **How many jobs similar to this one have you done?**
- **Do you have the appropriate licences? (Ask to see these, and take note of licence numbers.)**
- **Will you use your own crew for the work or will you subcontract part of the job? Are the subcontractors licensed?**
- **Are you and any subcontractors covered by workers' compensation and liability insurance?**
- **Why is your price higher (or lower) than the competition's?**
- **Are cleanup and garbage disposal included in the price?**

name, address and ownership of any company with a current business registration. Obviously, if the company you're considering is not registered under the name you've been given, warning bells should go off.

GET IT IN WRITING

If everything checks out, it's time to sign the contract. In addition to basic business information (address, contact numbers, business and GST numbers), the contract should have a detailed cost breakdown (materials and labour), indicate start and completion dates and explain warranty details. Any irrelevant sections of a pre-printed contract should be crossed out or labelled "N/A." For really large jobs, such as a home addition, you might consider having a lawyer read over the contract before you sign it. Think of any legal fees charged as added insurance.

Upon signing, the contractor will probably ask for a deposit: typically 10 to 20 percent of the total job. If they insist on something higher, this should tip you off. And, it goes without saying, you'd be wise to avoid "cash deals." For lengthy projects, it's possible that the contractor may ask for instalment payments to be made when certain parts of the job are completed. This payment schedule should be tied to the completion of specific stages of the job and written into the contract.

A DONE DEAL

Now that you're probably terrified to let anyone with a tool belt within 500 metres of your home, it's a good time to point out that the vast majority of contractors are honest, hard-working people who aren't out to take advantage of anyone. To use the old cliché, it really is only a few bad apples that spoil the barrel. With just a little extra legwork, you should be able to pick the right contractor. □

A RENOVATION CONTRACT INCLUDES…

- **The start and completion dates of the work, as well as clauses covering excusable delays and penalties (although few contractors will accept a penalty clause).**
- **Plans and estimates for major projects, and an amending order form authorizing the client to make changes to the original plans.**
- **For smaller projects, a detailed description of the work with sketches, if necessary.**
- **The names of the individuals who will be responsible for obtaining permits (construction, plumbing, electricity) and arranging for inspections.**
- **A schedule of payments and holdbacks.**
- **The hourly rate for labour in the event of extra work.**
- **Proof that the contractor has insurance coverage.**
- **A list of the subcontractors who will work on the project.**
- **Warranty details.**
- **A clause covering the procedure for resolving disputes, including the name of a mediator, if necessary.**
- **A cancellation clause stipulating how much it will cost the client to cancel the contract at different stages of the project.**

WARNING BELLS

- **"I'm working nearby, and I have some extra materials..."**
- **"You have to act today to get this amazing offer..."**
- **"I can give you a deal if you pay cash..."**
- **"We'd like to make your home a showcase for our work..."**
- **"Twenty-five percent is a standard deposit..."**

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If I Knew Then...

When the dust finally settles, there's going to be at least one little thing you wish you had thought of before the renovations started. Take advantage of the benefits of hindsight to get the results you really want.

BY **NANCY LEPATOUREL**

Every morning, I find myself mopping up a little pool of water in the corner of my bathtub. It's an ongoing reminder to me that a soaker tub isn't compatible with a built-in shower stall. If only I'd known about this bathroom mop-up issue before choosing a tub-and-shower system.

Planning any renovation is an overwhelming task, and everyone – even a seasoned pro – is apt to make a mistake now and then. To help minimize your makeover mishaps, we talked to designers and contractors about blunders they've seen clients commit or have been guilty of themselves. Here's their "If I knew then…" list to help make your own renovations as problem-free as possible.

"I wish I hadn't selected my colours in the store." "Don't buy anything under the fluorescent lights in a store," says Carol Garrow of Garrow Interiors in Port Elgin, Ont. Lighting can change the way colours appear, and you may get a totally different look than what you were going for. Take paint samples home and ask retailers for fabric swatches. Garrow also suggests borrowing a colour wheel from the library to help you choose a palette.

"If only I'd placed my orders sooner." It can take up to three months to get the stone tiles you ordered for your kitchen floor. Custom cabinets? Expect to wait at least 10 weeks. "*While You Were Out* doesn't happen in reality," says Samantha Farjo, a Toronto-based designer. Waiting for items to arrive can turn a three-month renovation into a six-month undertaking. To keep delays at a minimum, place orders two to three months before work is set to start.

"I wish we had talked more about our individual tastes." Before you start any renovation, go through magazines and catalogues to find at least five items you and your partner can agree are beautiful. It sparks a great conversation and will ensure you're both happy with the design direction of the project. "Just saying you both like traditional isn't enough," says designer Céline Pitre of Céline Interiors in Vancouver. "Traditional can mean very different things to different people."

"If only I'd been more specific about how I wanted my wall-to-wall carpet laid." Before it's done, discuss where you would like the seams to be. "I've made the mistake of assuming installers would think like me," says

ILLUSTRATIONS: NATHALIE DION.

Toronto designer Jennifer Worts. But "they [often run] the seam through the centre of the room instead of where it would have been covered by a cabinet." It happens that seams in high-traffic areas will flatten and wear with time.

It's equally important to be specific when laying tiles. "Don't assume tradespeople will lay tiles lengthwise," says Farjo. Have your tile installer do a mock layout on the floor so you can agree on their direction and where partial tiles will lie. You want to be just as specific about grout. "Ask your contractor to show you the colour of the grout, as well as the distance between the tiles, so you can visualize what one-eighth or one-16th of an inch looks like," she says.

"I wish I'd taken a 'green' approach." Sure you want your home to be environmentally friendly, but 'green' living requires early planning. LED lights are more efficient than compact fluorescents and could produce a warmer light, but you must discuss different installation needs with your electrician prior to starting any wiring. "If you want to go 'green,' you need to talk about it before construction begins," says Robin Fraser of Fraser Designs + Associates in Toronto. For example, paint that's low in, or free of, volatile organic compounds (VOCs) may need to be ordered weeks beforehand. You also want to consider whether certain eco-smart products are right for you. For example, Fraser points out that our short summers – with only a few unbearably hot days – might not warrant the cost of installing a green cooling system for the entire house. It may be better to cool just a single room or floor.

"I wish I'd gotten a signed change order." What you think is a small change could be more costly than expected. "A simple decision like choosing tile A over tile B can make a job go three weeks over schedule because the new style isn't available," says project manager Scott Rogers of SRPM Inc. in Toronto. Speak with your contractor or designer about the ramifications of all changes, regardless of how minor they seem, and have any effects on cost or time put in writing.

"If only my custom furniture had detachable pieces." You've noted height and width, taking into account narrow doorways and halls, as well as the height of ceilings and elevators, but mistakes still happen when measuring for custom furniture. "Make sure some portion is removable," says Timothy Mather of TM Design in Toronto. Sofas are the worst to manoeuvre, so ask for detachable legs, back or arms. And custom bookcases should come in separate pieces too. If you move, you'll be grateful for those detachable parts, as they'll help lighten the load and increase the likelihood of your furniture fitting through a smaller hallway.

"If only I'd learned the right way to conceal my drywall seams and screw holes." Your first coat of joint compound should be a powdered 90-minute setting compound such as Sheetrock 90 by CGC, which will dry like concrete. "You need something hard to set the wall and prevent cracks due to shrinkage," says Bryan Baeumler, host of *Disaster DIY*. Next, use one or two coats of an all-purpose mud, mixed with water for ease of spreading and to prevent air bubbles. Keep the coats thin to minimize sanding in between. "People use way too much mud and have to sand forever," says Baeumler.

"I wish I'd thought about wall hangings before we built the wall." "Decide where you're going to hang things like towel bars and cabinets before you put up drywall," says Jim Caruk, host of *Real Renos*. To securely mount the items, you need a backing, like a piece of plywood, to drill screws into. Without a backing, you'll need to use wall plugs, which still tend to come out over time.

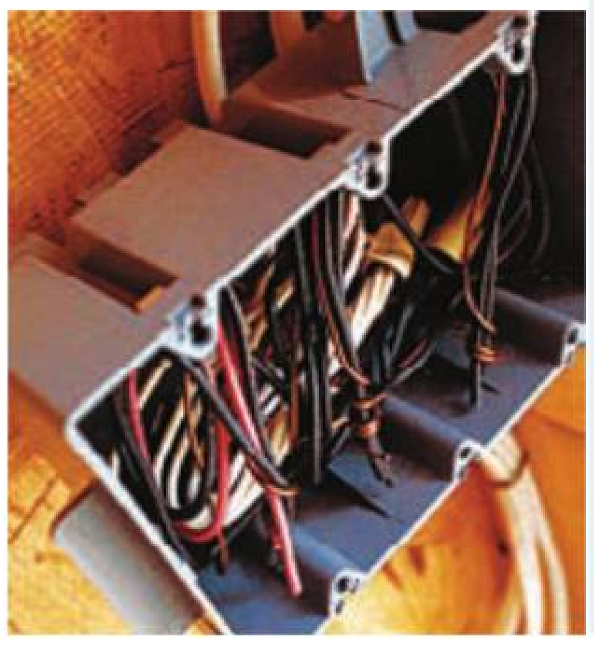
"If only I hadn't let my contractor choose the baseboard trim." Hire a finishing carpenter to do the baseboard trim; the attention to detail will pay off. If you don't speak up about what you want, you'll get a basic quarter-round, which looks too makeshift. Use a shoe mould at the bottom of the baseboard for added width and dramatic impact. □

FIND A BUSINESS
LOOK BEHIND THE TAB

Help! I Need Somebody

How to find a reliable pro for 10 common household jobs, what you should ask before you hire them and what you should expect to pay.

BY **MARTHA UNIACKE BREEN**

CONTRACTOR	HOW TO FIND ONE	WHAT TO ASK	MONEY MATTERS	COMMENTS
	■ Word of mouth ■ Building centres ■ Through other tradespeople like plumbers and electricians	■ Are they bonded, licensed, insured and covered by workers' compensation insurance? The Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada website (www.awcbc.org) has links for all provinces . ■ What will the work schedule be?	■ Rate varies. ■ On large jobs, split fee into instalments with firm payment schedule. ■ Withhold 10 percent on invoices for 30 to 60 days to avoid liens on your property if contractor fails to pay suppliers or workers.	■ The more info you have on your project the better, right down to the style of fixtures and materials. ■ Trust your instincts; a personality fit is crucial. ■ Contractors should ask you as many questions as you ask them; be wary of one who doesn't.
PLUMBER 	■ Word of mouth ■ Yellow Pages™ for well-established companies ■ Through your contractor	■ Are they licensed and insured? ■ What is their training and experience? ■ Does the quote include fixtures, repairs to walls? ■ What guarantees do they offer on their repair or installation work?	■ Most plumbing companies offer flat-rate pricing ■ Flat rate varies on small routine repairs.	■ It's cheaper to group tasks, so if you have multiple jobs, try to get them all done at once. ■ Avoid possible markups by buying fixtures yourself. ■ Get multiple quotes on large non-emergency jobs.
ELECTRICIAN 	■ Word of mouth ■ The Canadian Electrical Contractors Association website (ceca.org) has links to provincial associations and member listings. ■ Yellow Pages™ for well-established companies ■ Through your contractor	■ Are they bonded, licensed, insured and covered by workers' compensation insurance? ■ What is their training? ■ How many years have they been in business? ■ What are their guarantees and payment terms?	■ Going rate: $60 to $80 per hour for most jobs. ■ Flat rate varies on some routine jobs.	■ Get a written estimate and multiple quotes on large jobs.
INTERIOR DESIGNER 	■ Word of mouth ■ Home shows ■ Magazines ■ Decorating, design or furniture stores ■ The Interior Designers of Canada website (interior designerscanada.org), or provincial associations	■ Are they designers (with college degrees and memberships in provincial design associations) or decorators? ■ What will be done at each stage in the project, and how long will it take? ■ Will they source products, as well as consult?	■ Going rates: interior designers, $150 to $250 per hour; decorators, $75 to $200 per hour. ■ Payment schedule and deposits for labour and materials are common. ■ Custom work (like upholstery) is non-refundable.	■ As with other professionals you'll work closely with, personality fit is extremely important.

	HOW TO FIND ONE	WHAT TO ASK	MONEY MATTERS	COMMENTS
HANDYPERSON 	■ Word of mouth ■ Yellow Pages™ and Internet for professional organizations like Handyman Matters, which offers licensed, bonded, insured professionals and guaranteed work.	■ Are they bonded, insured, and covered by workers' compensation insurance? ■ What are their qualifications? ■ Are they licensed for plumbing or electrical jobs? ■ Do they offer guarantees?	■ Going rate: $50 to $75 per hour for most jobs through a professional organization	■ They can be worth their weight in gold, or disastrous; word-of-mouth referrals or established companies are your safest bets. ■ In small towns, many people supplement their income this way, with varying levels of expertise.
HOME ORGANIZER 	■ Word of mouth ■ Internet: Try websites like organizersincanada.com, which lets you search by location or task, and offers tips on how to hire an organizer.	■ How long have they been in business? ■ What is their training and background? ■ Do they work alone or with the homeowner? ■ Is there an additional consultation fee or is that included in the project fee?	■ Going rate: $50 to $175 per hour, varying across country and by project	■ Home organizers are different from home cleaners, though clearing out is part of the job. ■ Home organizing can be an emotional issue, so look for someone you feel comfortable with.
PAINTER 	■ Word of mouth ■ Yellow Pages™ for well-established companies ■ Home-builders' associations ■ Paint stores ■ Community newspapers ■ Through your contractor	■ Are they bonded, insured and covered by workers' compensation insurance? ■ Can they provide references? ■ Can they bring photos of their work? (Look for professional results: Examine trim and where the walls meet the ceiling for clean, neat lines.)	■ Going rate: $20 to $40 per hour or $325 per day; average interior room takes one to 1-1⁄2 days ■ Written estimate should indicate work to be done, type of paint, number of coats	■ If you don't want to pay painters to clear rooms, personally move furniture to the centre of the room; remove valuables and pictures. ■ Check room for existing paint splatters before the painter begins.
LANDSCAPE DESIGNER 	■ Word of mouth – ask friends or neighbours with a garden design you admire ■ Large garden centres ■ Yellow Pages™ or Internet for provincial landscape designers' associations	■ What services does the design plan fee include? ■ Is this fee refundable if the designer installs the garden? ■ Do they have references and photographs of similar jobs? ■ What is the length and scope of their guarantee?	■ Most reputable landscape design firms offer free consultations. Prices vary across country and by project	■ A design plan is worthwhile even if you install plants yourself over several years, since you then have an overall vision to work toward. ■ Landscapers should check with utility companies for underground lines before digging.
WINDOW CLEANER 	■ Word of mouth ■ Yellow Pages™	■ Are they insured and covered by workers' compensation insurance? ■ What is their training? How many years have they been in business? ■ Will they remove and replace storm windows?	■ Going rate: $50 to $75 per hour (one person) up to $130 per hour (two person cleaning crew)	■ Although window cleaners can clean both inside and outside of windows, cleaning your own interiors saves money. ■ Make sure they use ladder arms, which protect eaves and are safer.
HOUSE CLEANER 	■ Ask friends if their cleaner is good and is willing to take on another client. ■ Yellow Pages™ for well-established agencies	■ Do they have references? ■ What is their training and experience? ■ Will they supply their own cleaning products or use yours? ■ What's their cancellation policy? ■ Will they handle the taxes? (Agencies often add GST to your bill.)	■ Going rates: individuals, $15 to $20+ per hour; agencies, $30 per hour (one person), $50 to $60 per hour (2 people) ■ Agencies cost more but provide bonded and insured pros – and replacements. (Picture this: your cleaner's sick and you're planning a party for tomorrow!)	■ Providing detailed cleaning instructions will help cleaners work to your satisfaction. ■ If you can't be at home during cleaning, beware of who gets your key – a bonded agency may be the best bet.

SOURCE INFORMATION: IMENEO CONSTRUCTION, TORONTO, 416-235-1232. HANDYMAN MATTERS, TORONTO, 416-486-1757. ORDERLY LIVES, TORONTO, 416-461-8018. GREENWOOD PAINTING, MISSISAUGA, ONT.,905-330-3114. SHERIDAN NURSERIES, TORONTO, 416-798-7970. WHITE SHARK WINDOW CLEANING, TORONTO, 416-363-7420

What Renovations Are the Most Cost-Effective?

To renovate your home and increase its market value in anticipation of selling it one day, here are several types of improvements and the corresponding rate of return on the amounts invested.

HIGHEST RETURN

- Bathroom upgrade: 75 percent to 100 percent
- Kitchen upgrade: 75 percent to 100 percent
- Interior or exterior painting: 50 percent to 100 percent

MEDIUM-LEVEL RETURN

- Roof replacement: 50 percent to 80 percent
- Replacement of furnace or heating system: 50 percent to 80 percent
- Finished basement: 50 percent to 75 percent
- Addition of family room: 50 percent to 75 percent
- Fireplace: 50 percent to 75 percent
- Installation of hardwood floor: 50 percent to 75 percent
- Construction of a garage: 50 percent to 75 percent
- Doors and windows: 50 percent to 75 percent
- Deck: 50 percent to 75 percent
- Central air conditioning: 25 percent to 75 percent

LOW RETURN

- Landscaping: 25 percent to 50 percent
- Interlocking paving stones on driveway: 25 percent to 50 percent
- Asphalt driveway: 20 percent to 50 percent
- Fence: 25 percent to 50 percent
- Pool: 10 percent to 40 percent
- Skylights: 0 percent to 25 percent □

Source: Appraisal Institute of Canada.

FIND A BUSINESS
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PHOTOS: ALFRED MEIKLEHAM (KITCHEN). MICHAEL GRAYDON (BATHROOM).

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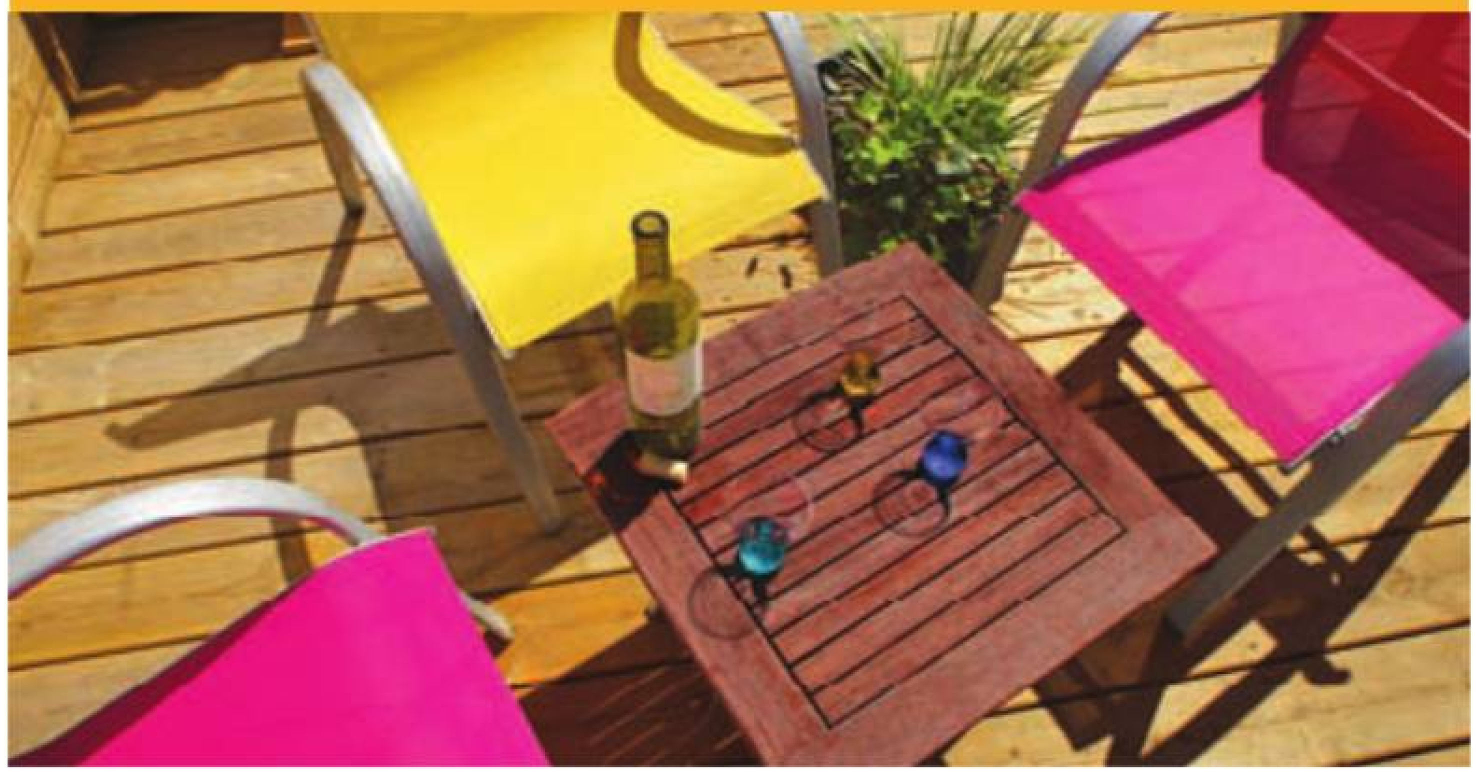

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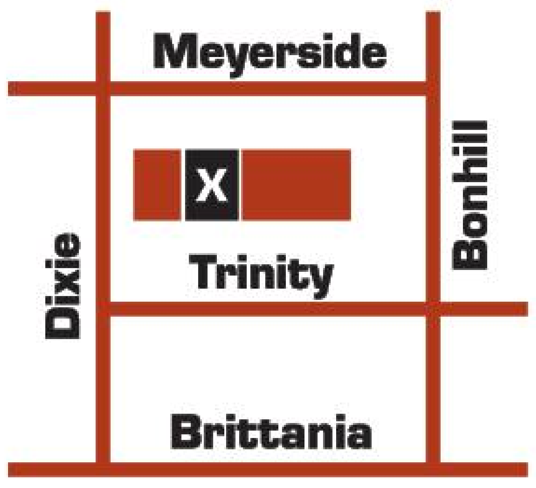

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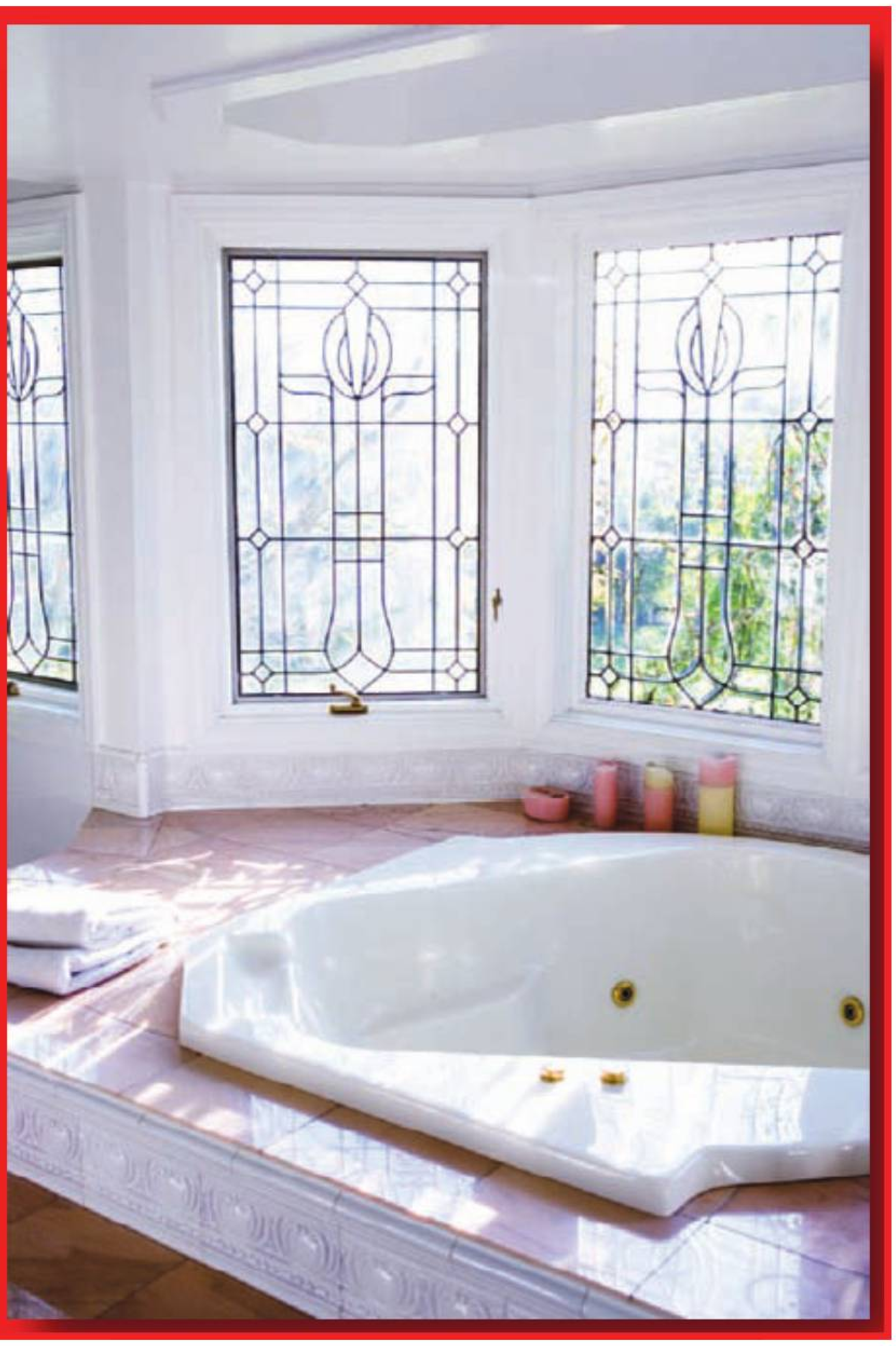

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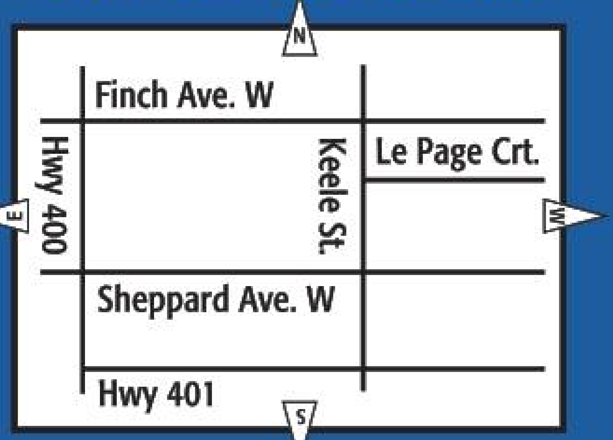

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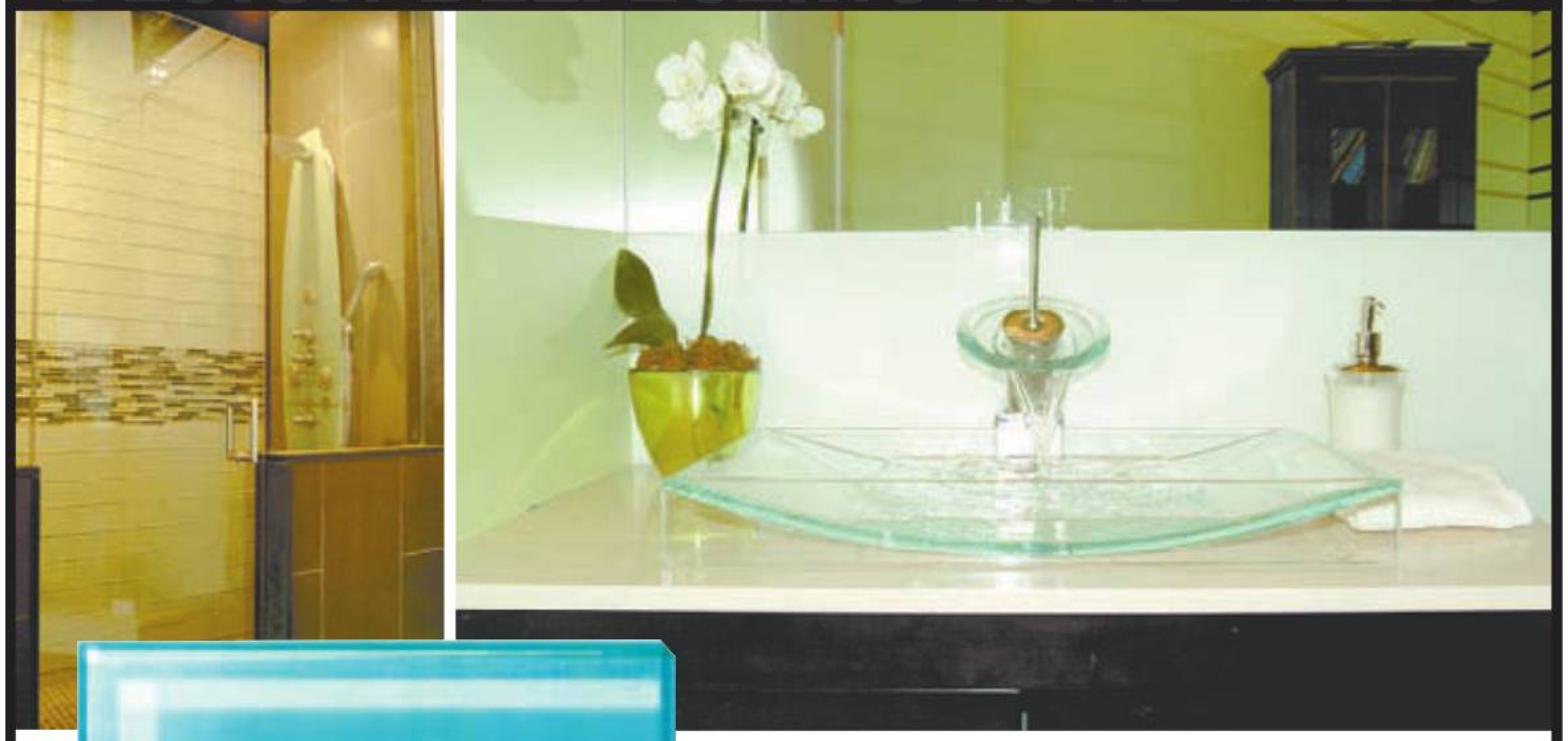

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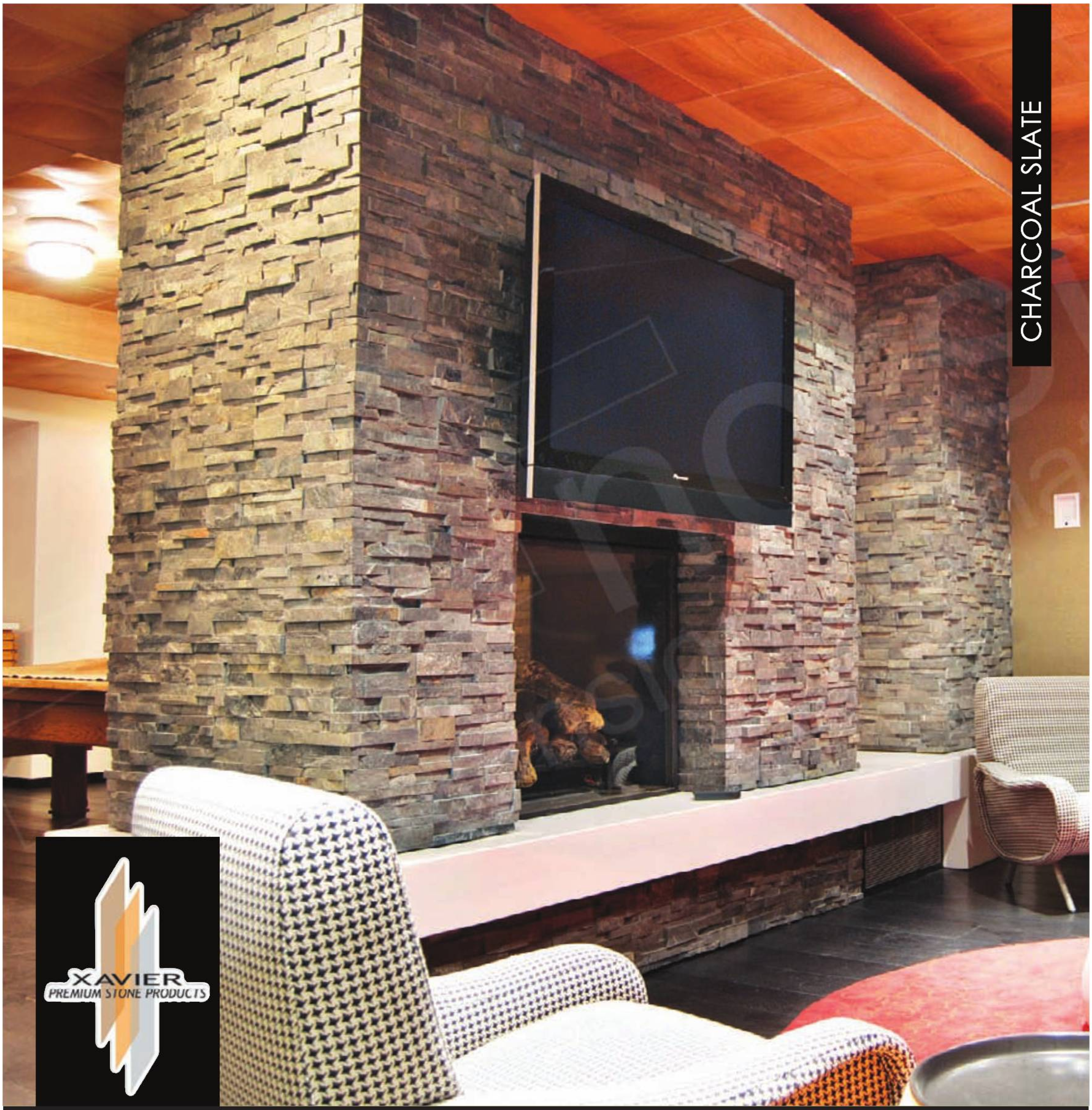

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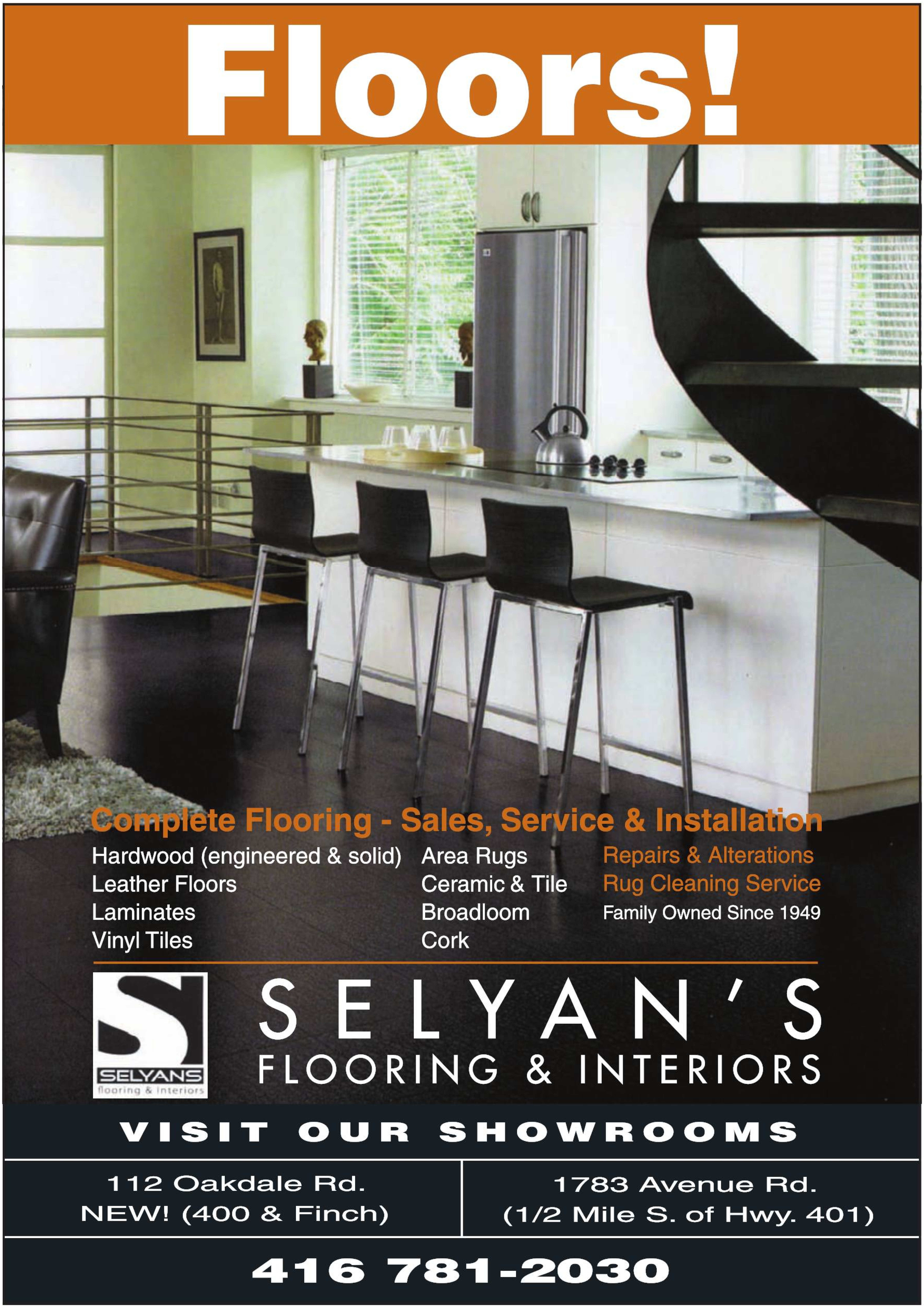
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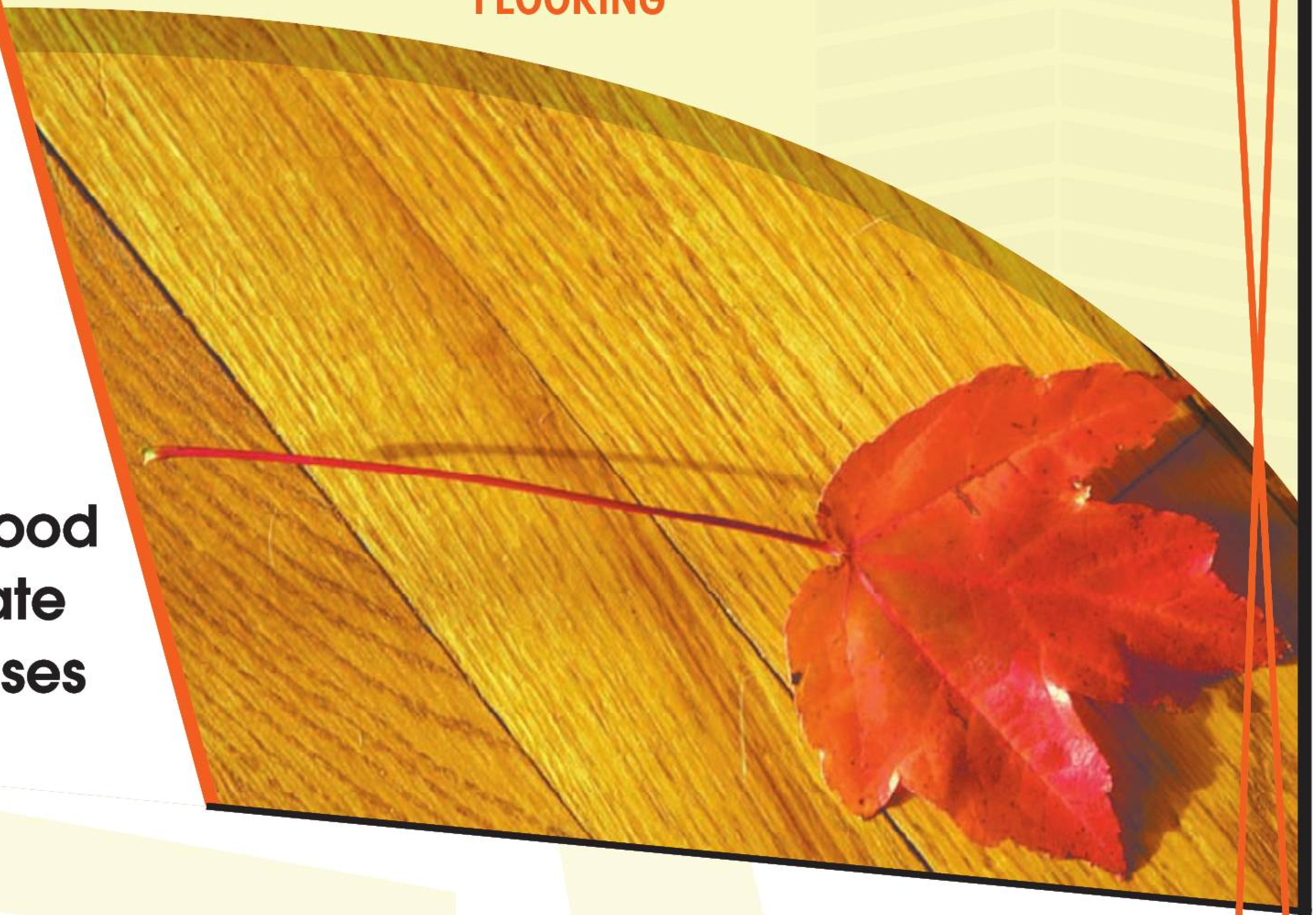

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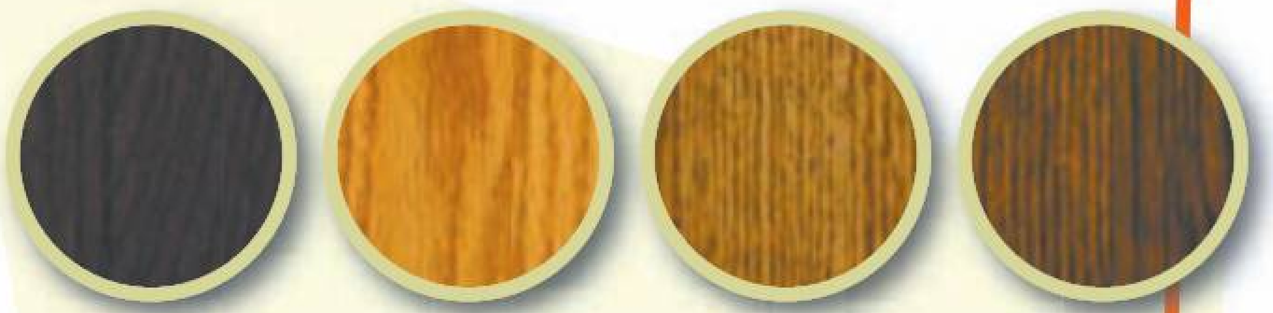

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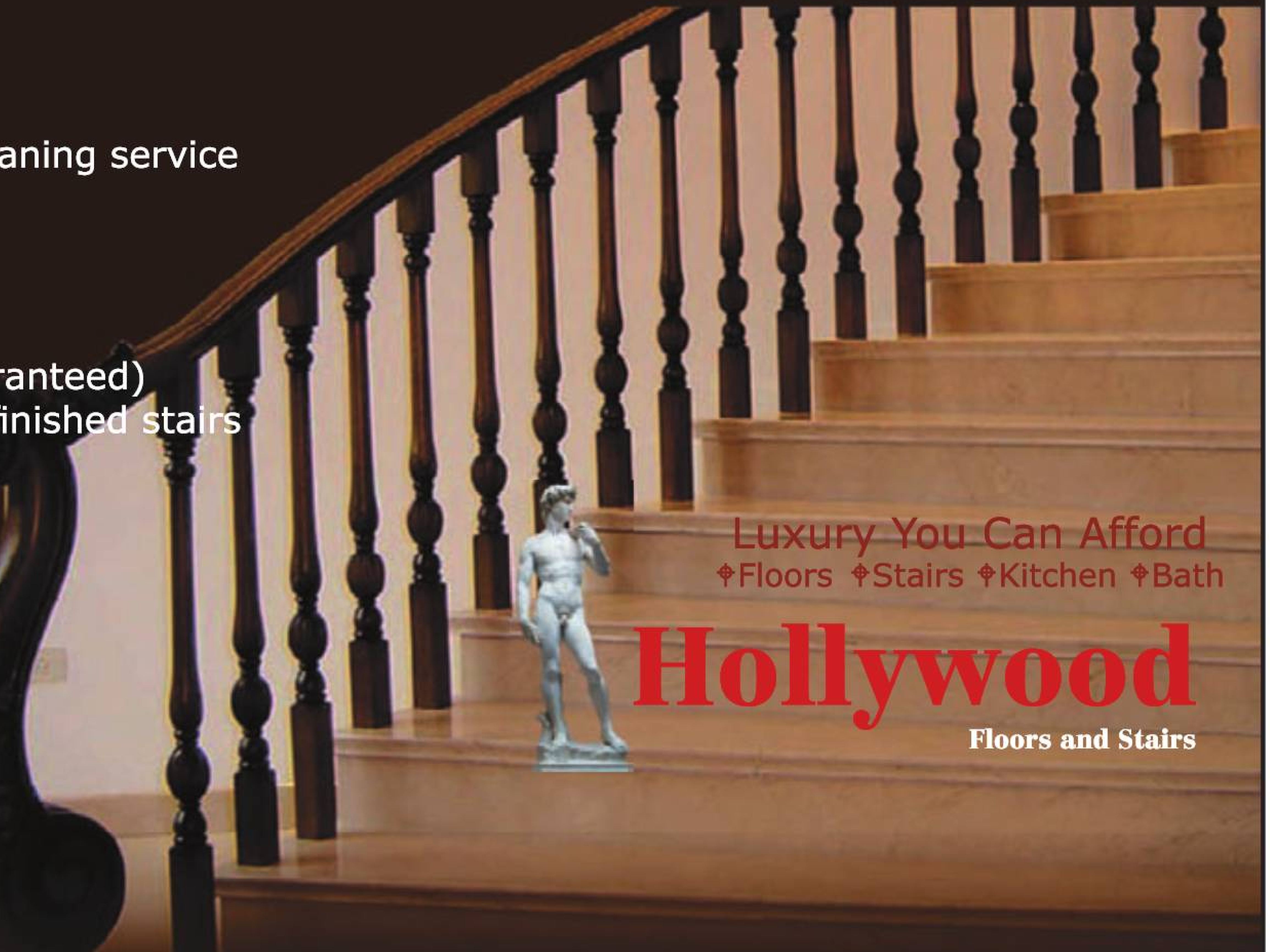

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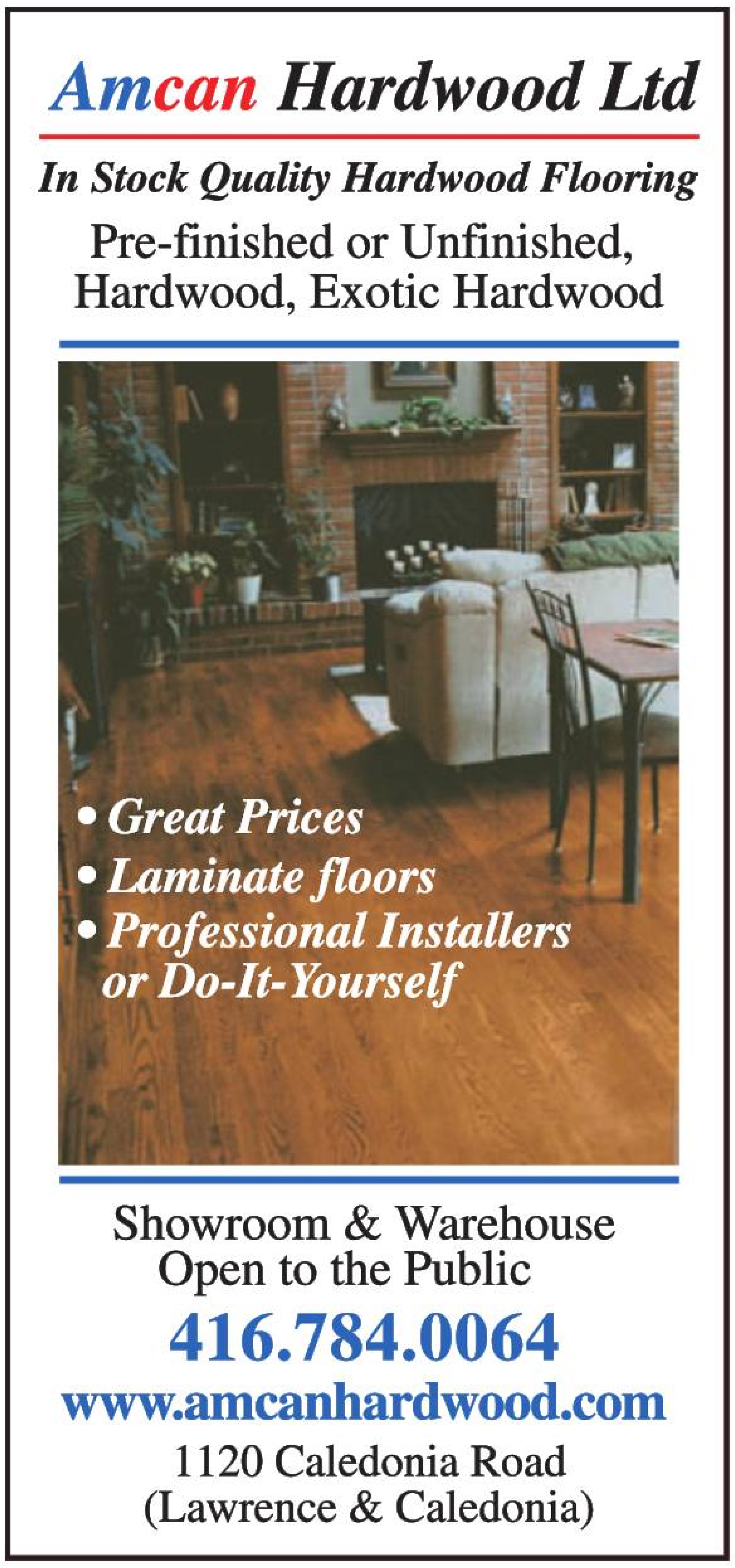
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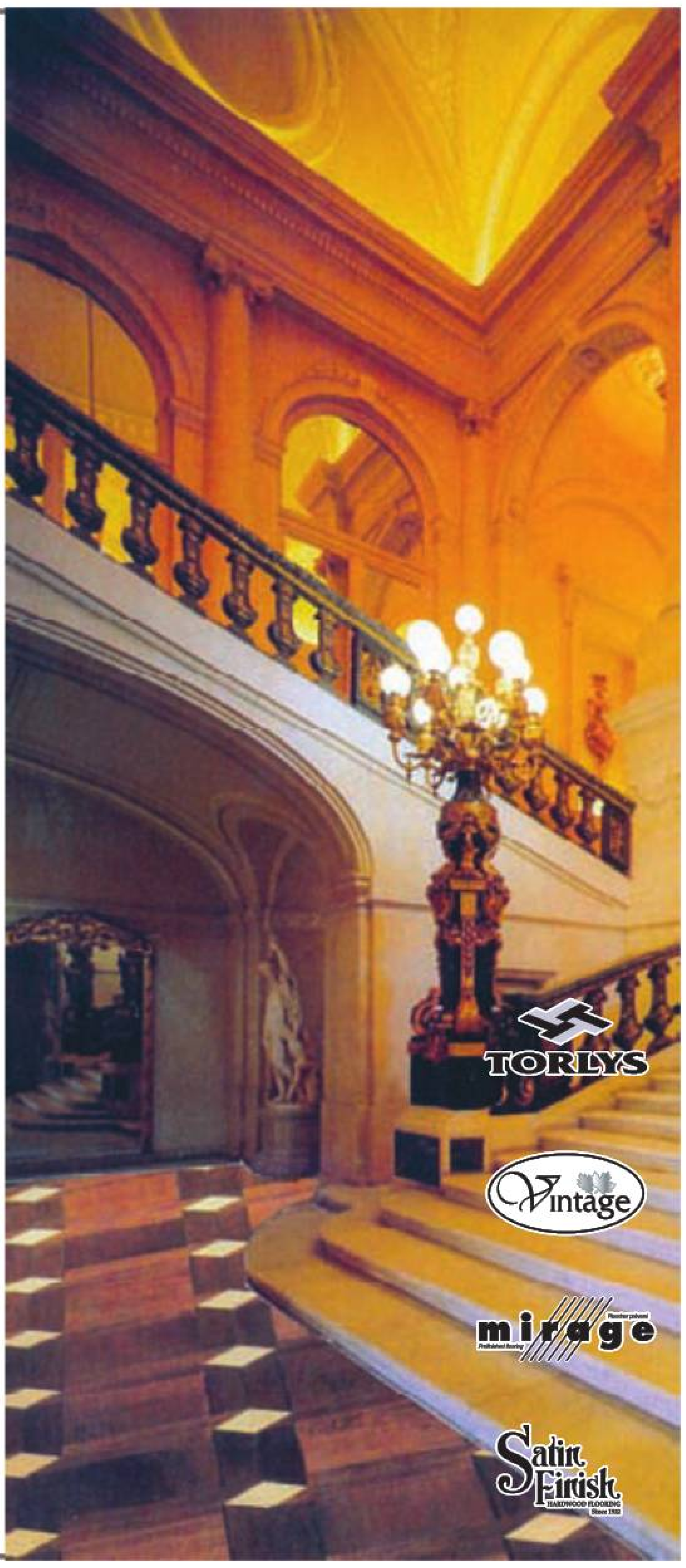

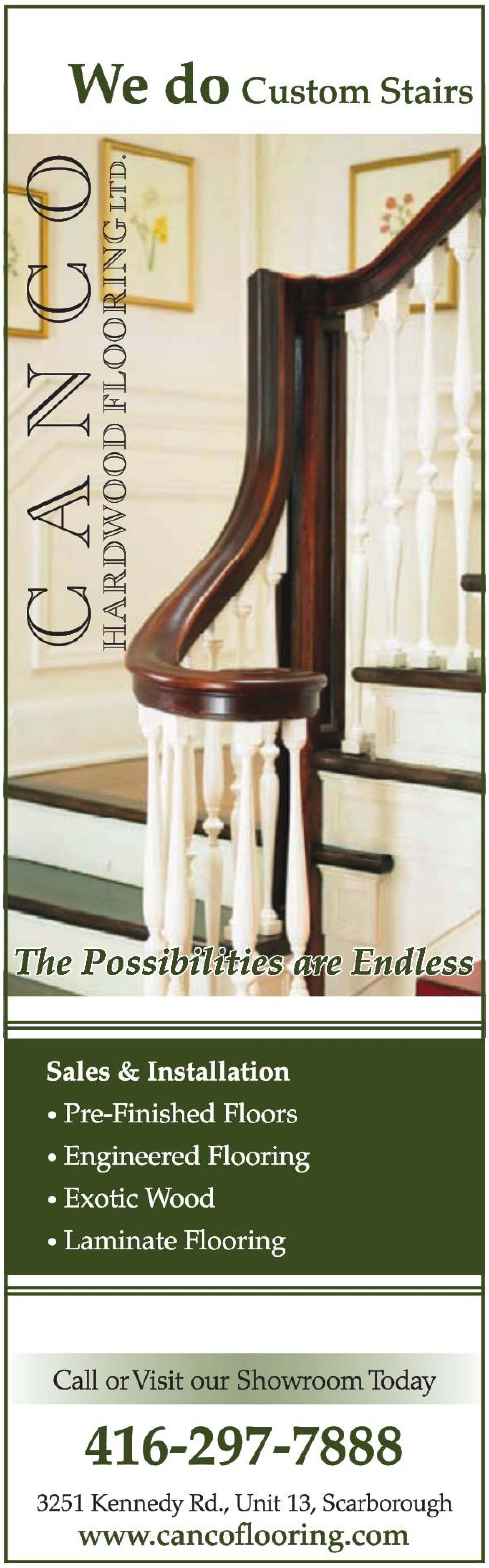

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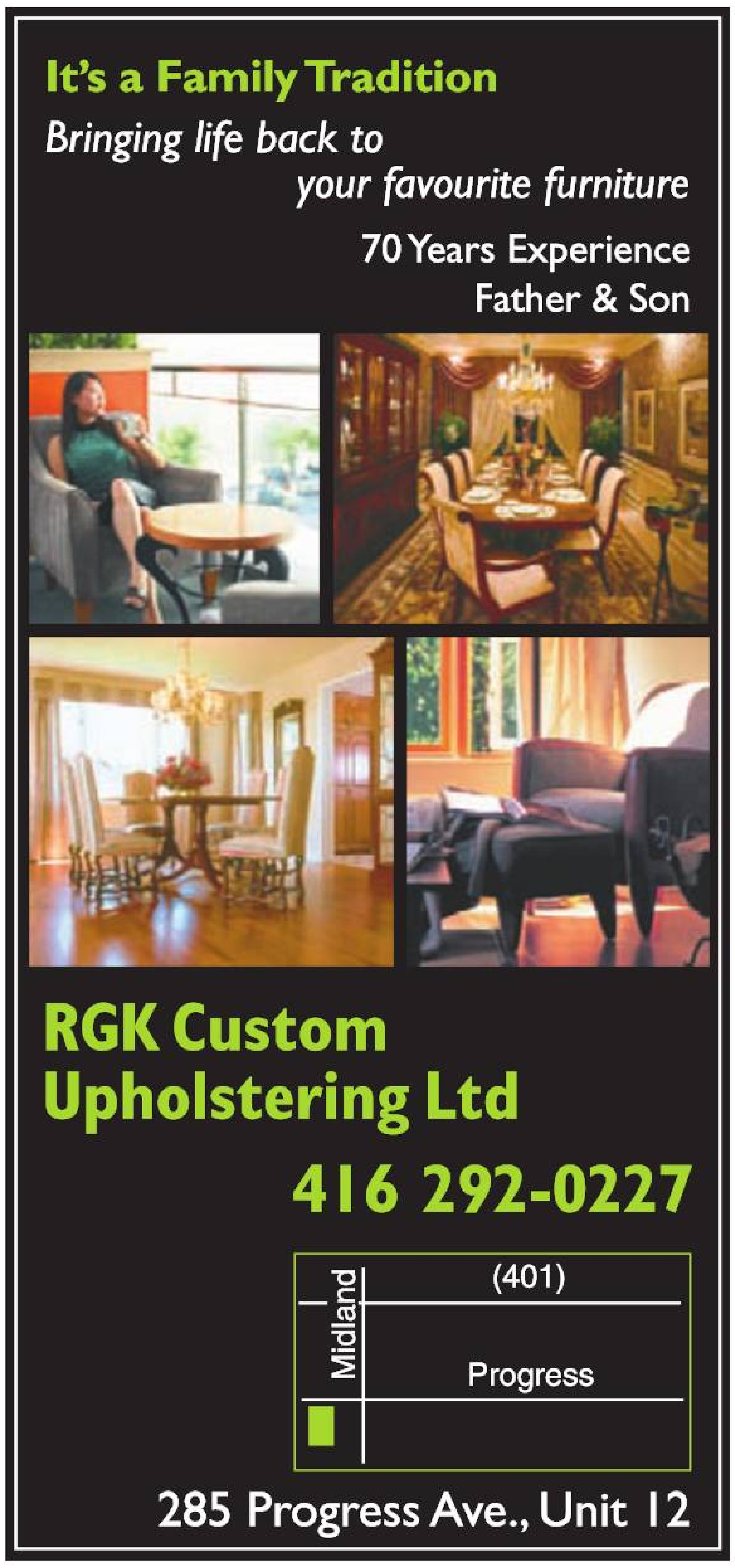

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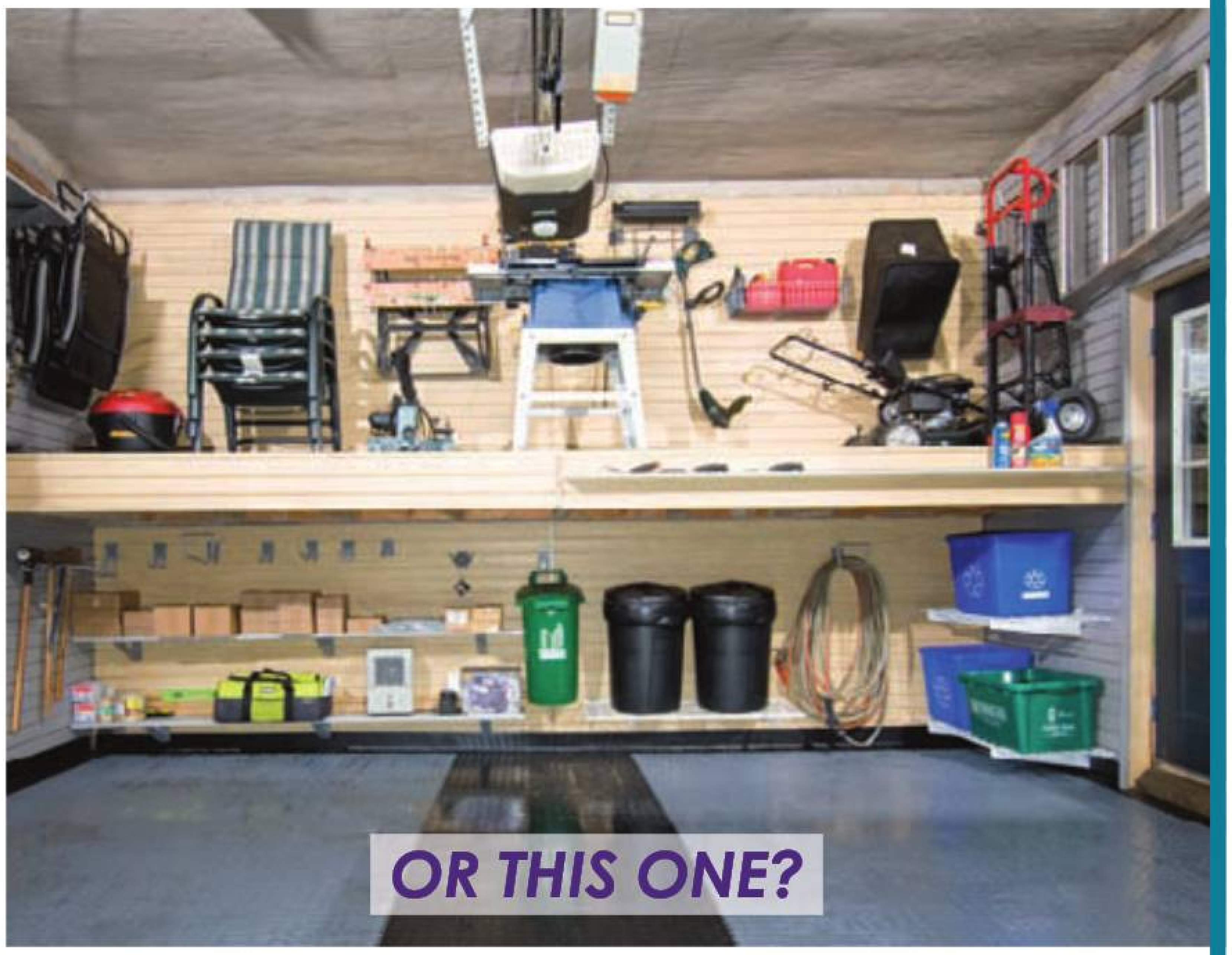

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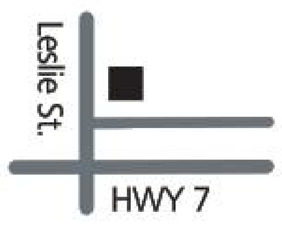

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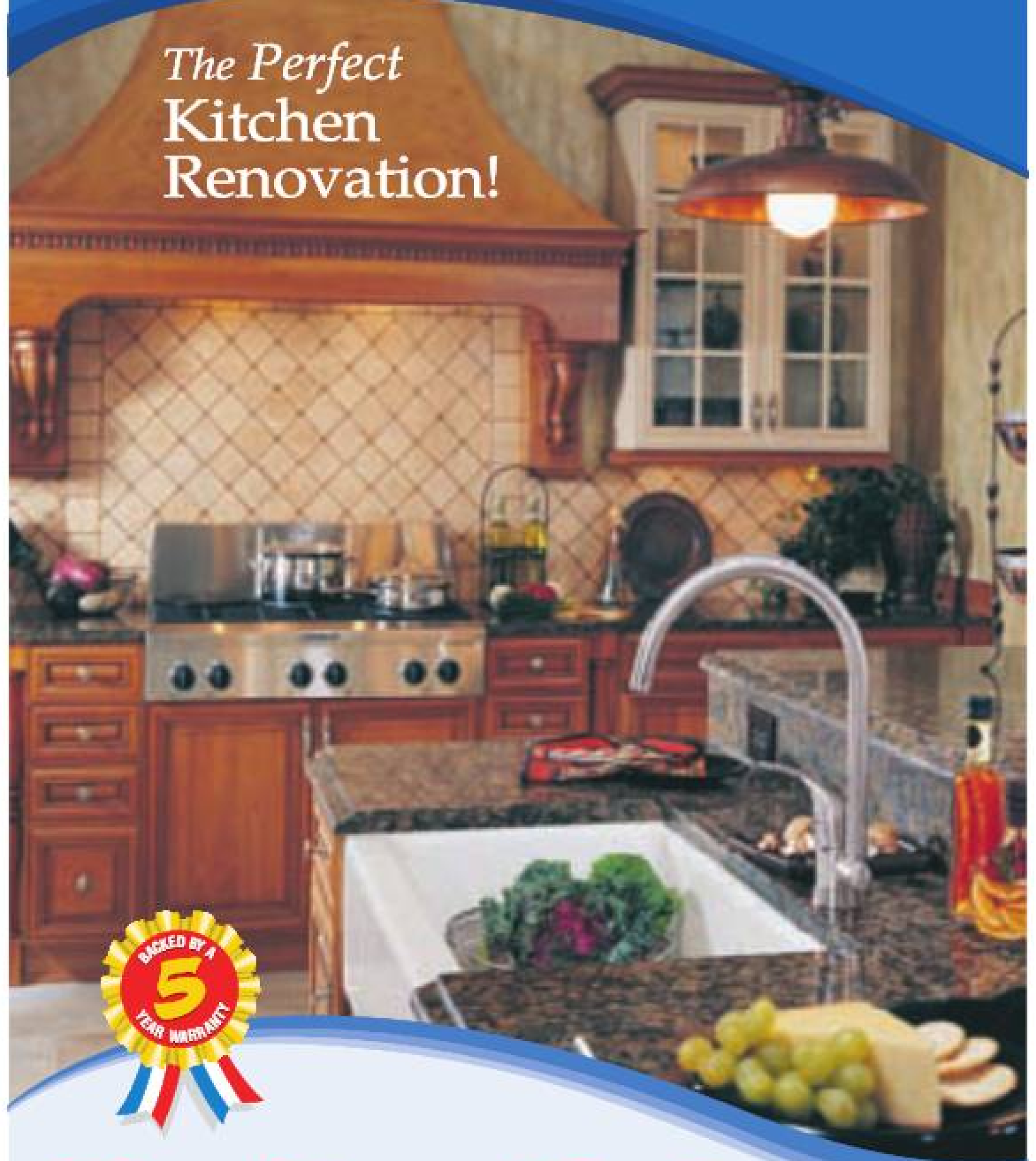

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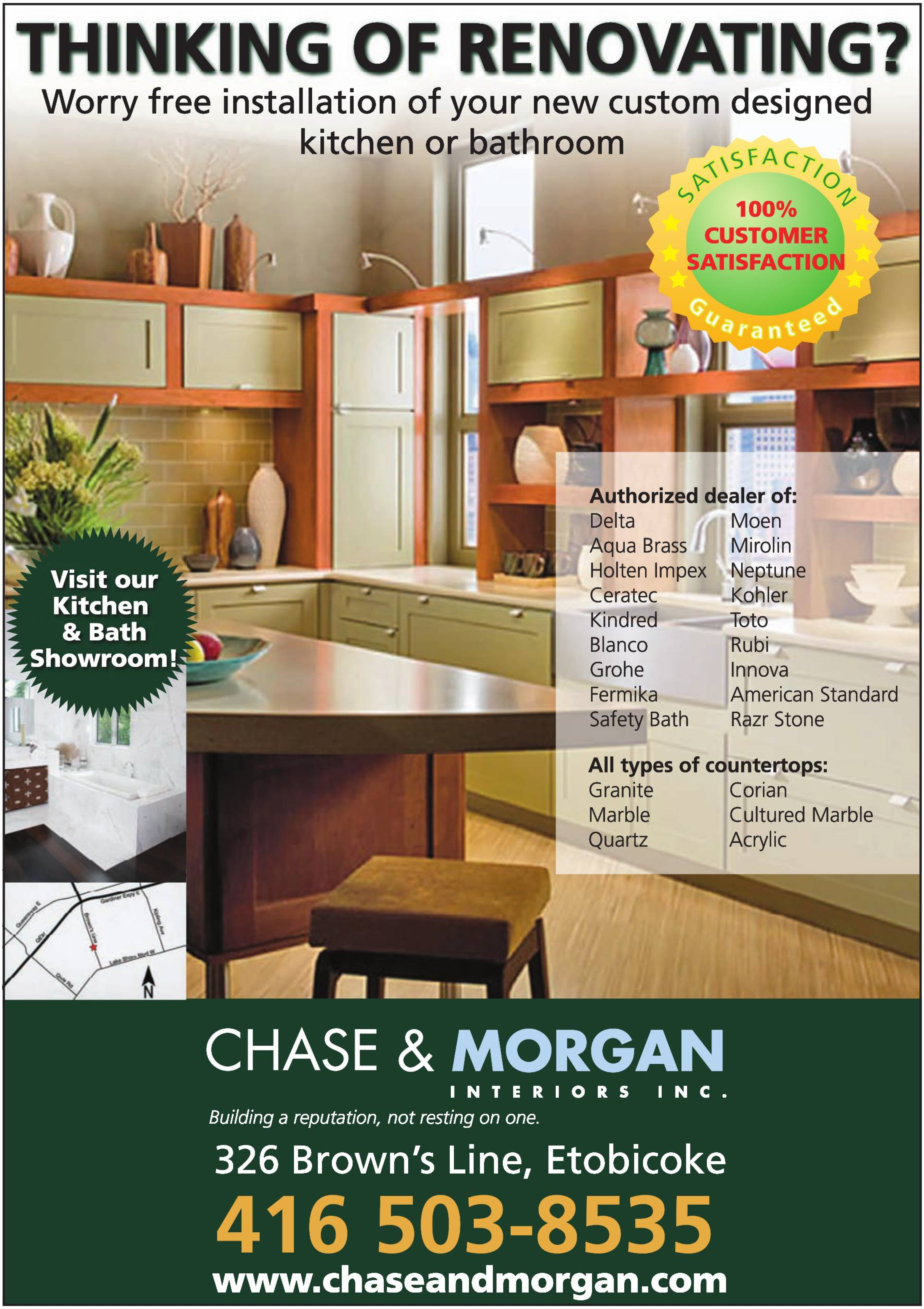
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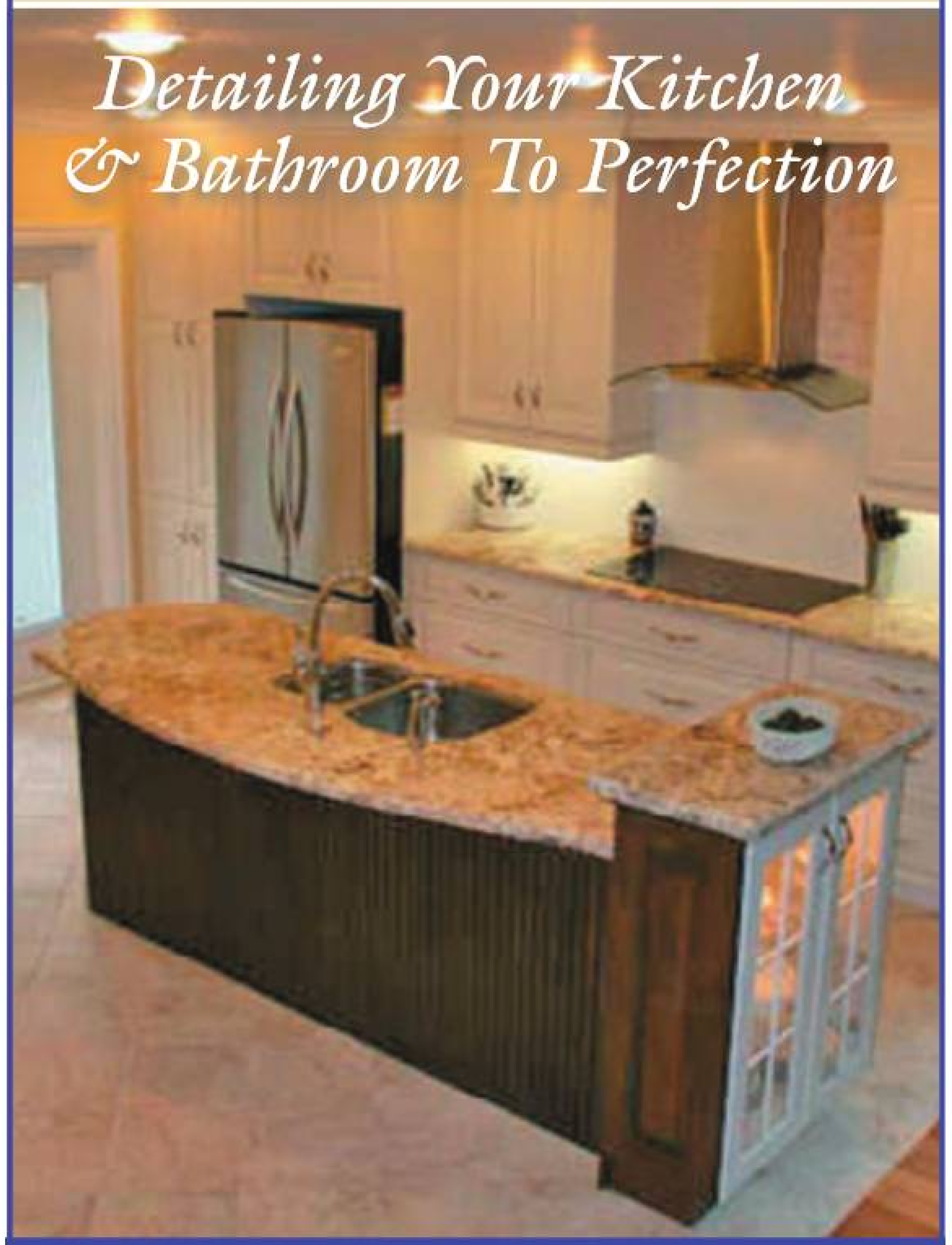

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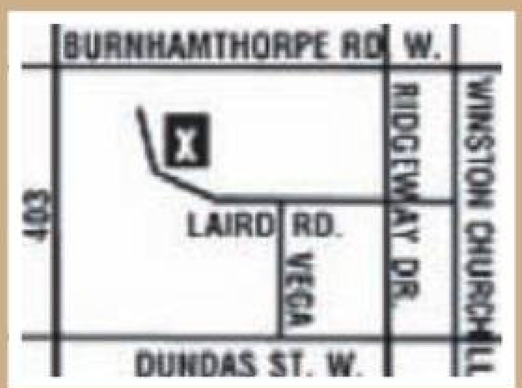

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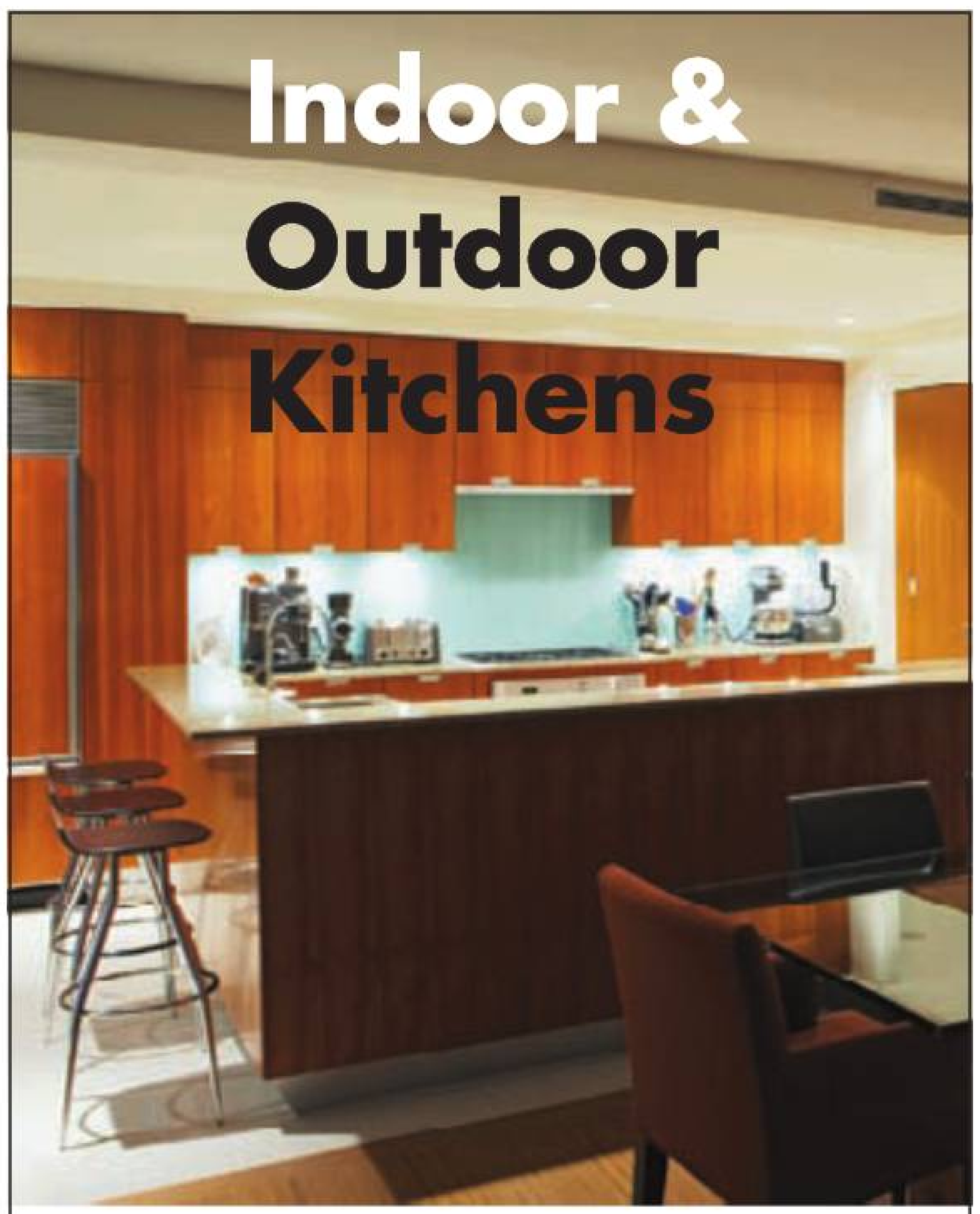

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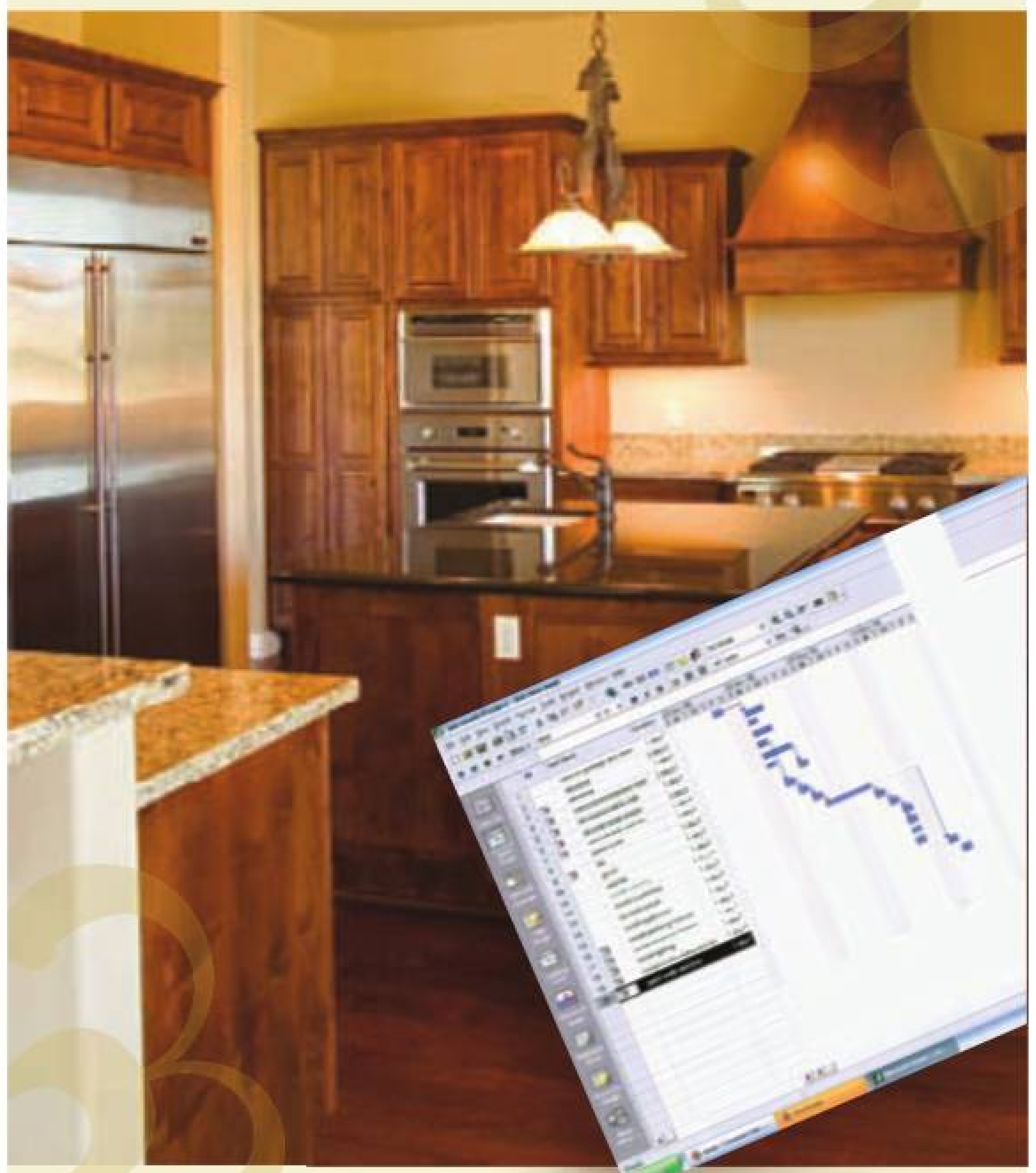

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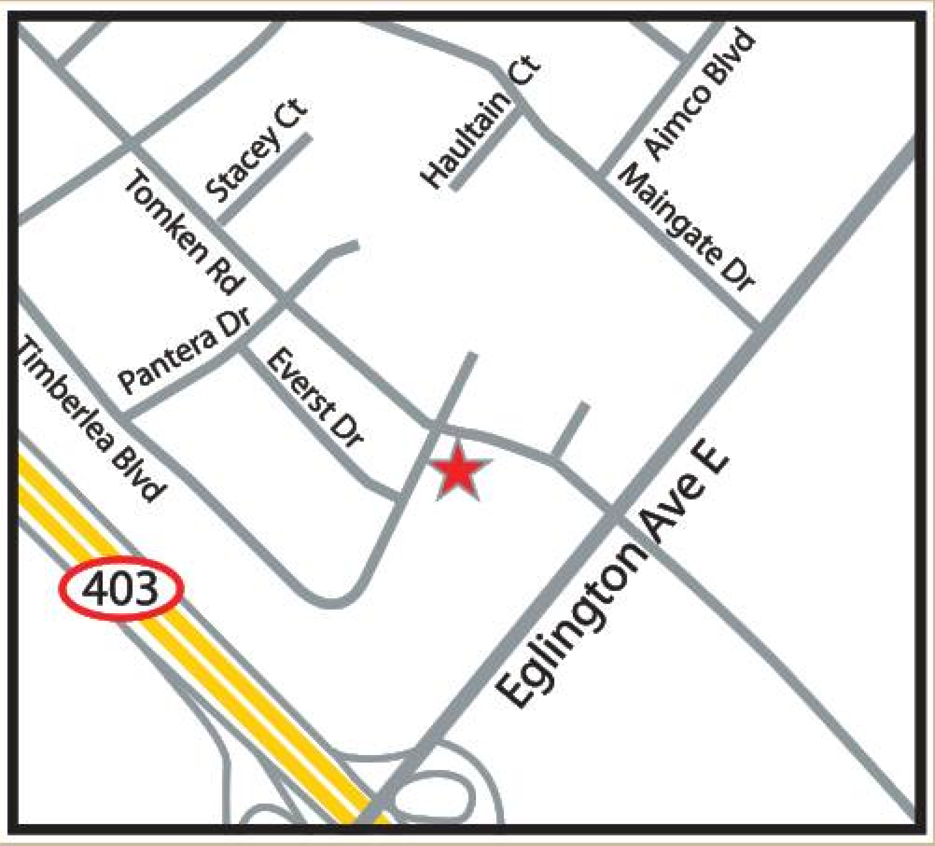

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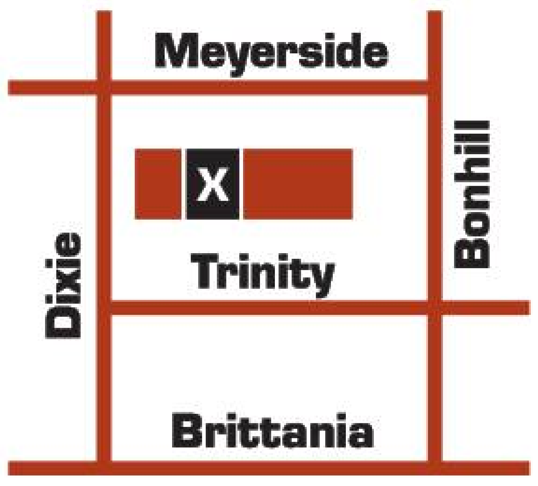

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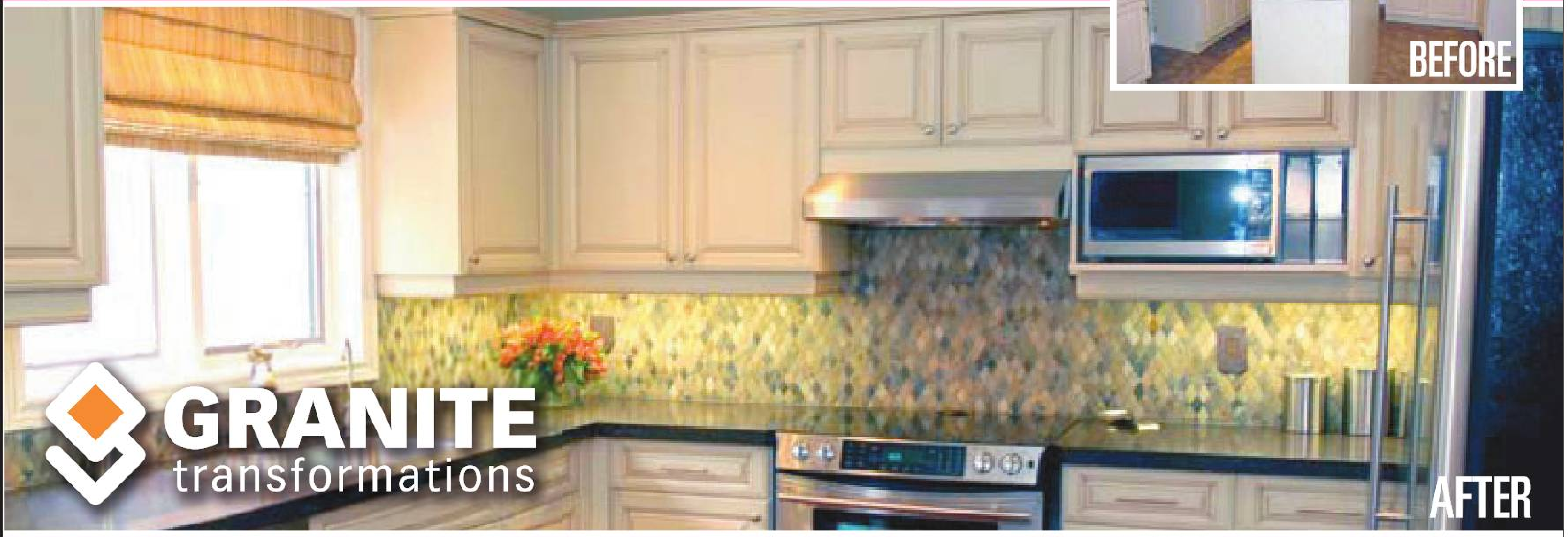

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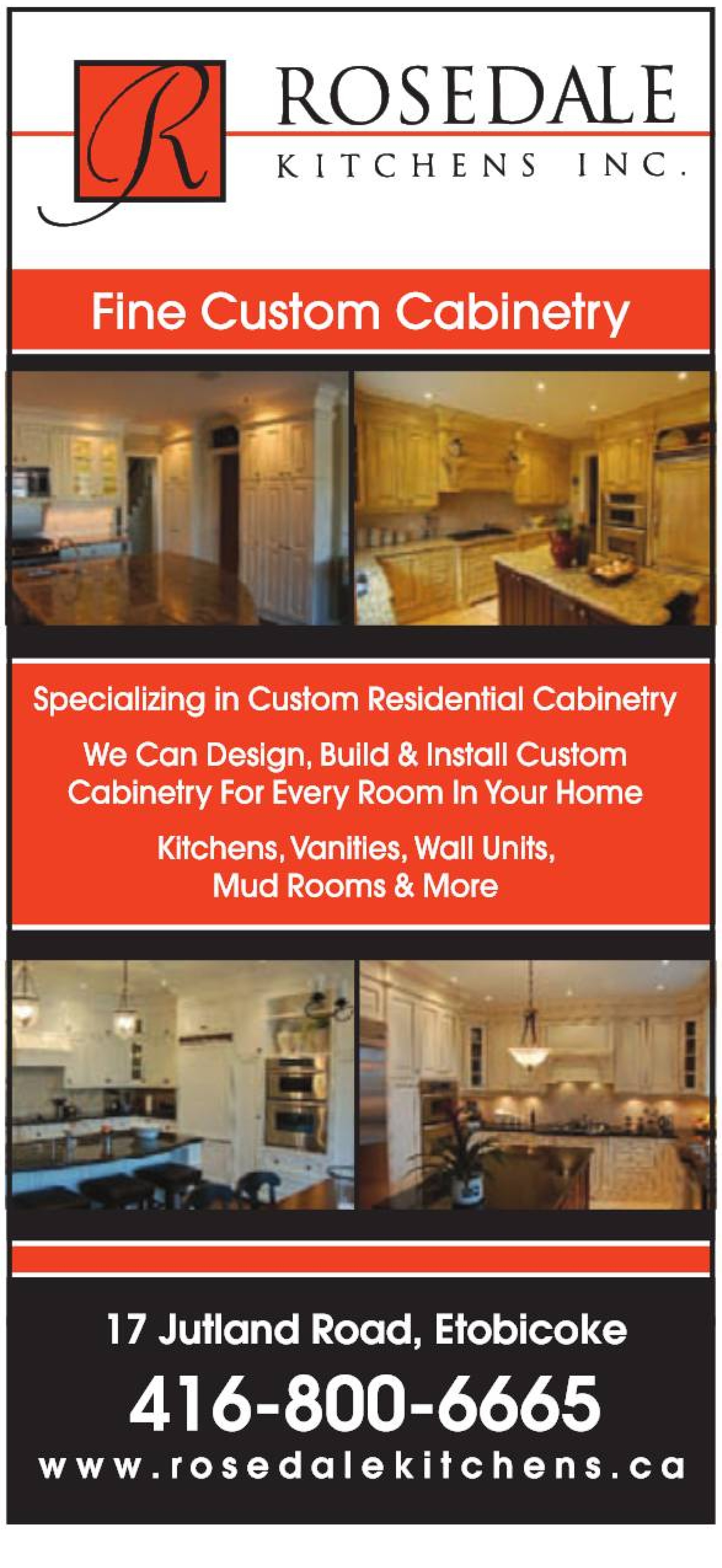
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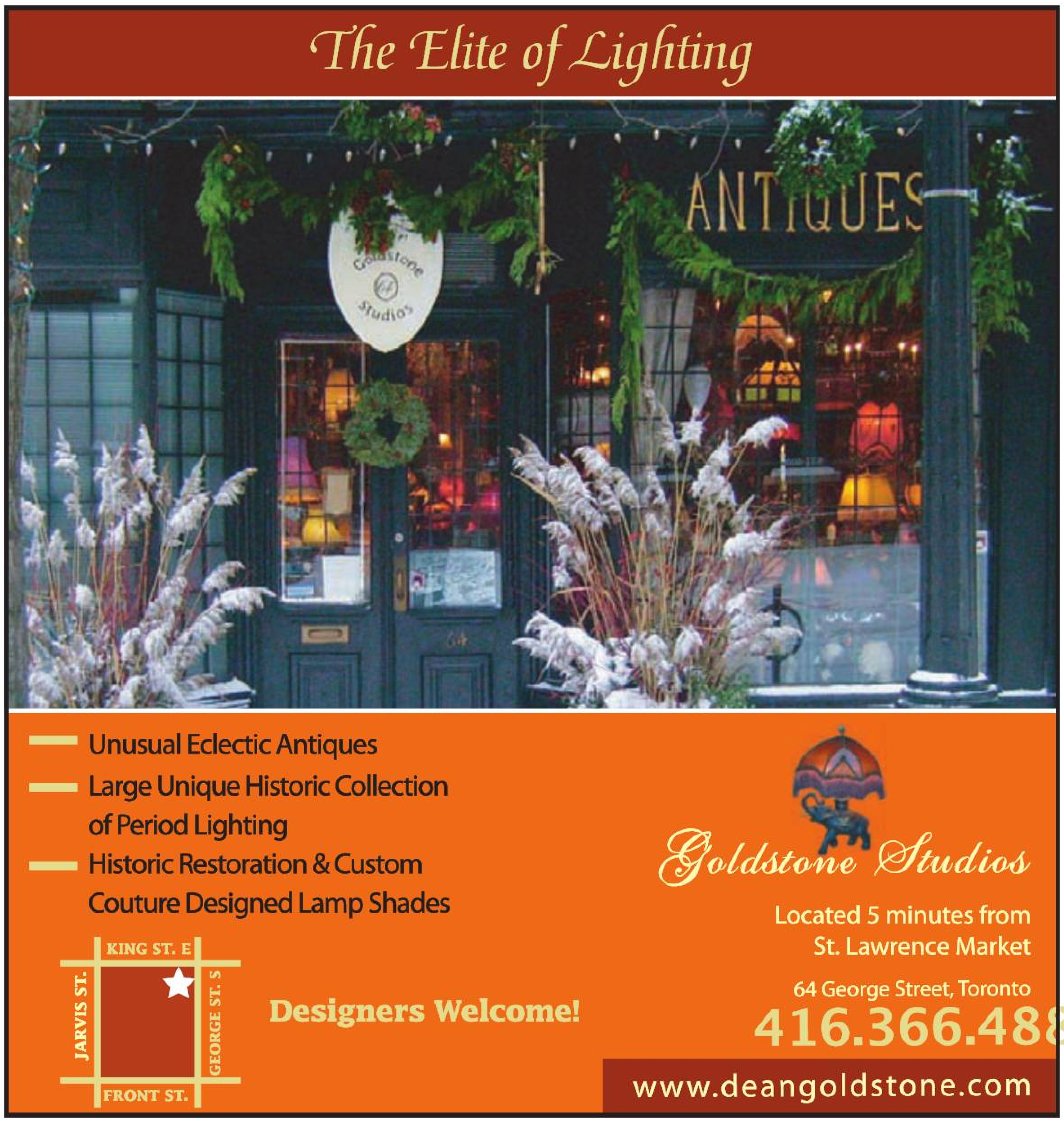
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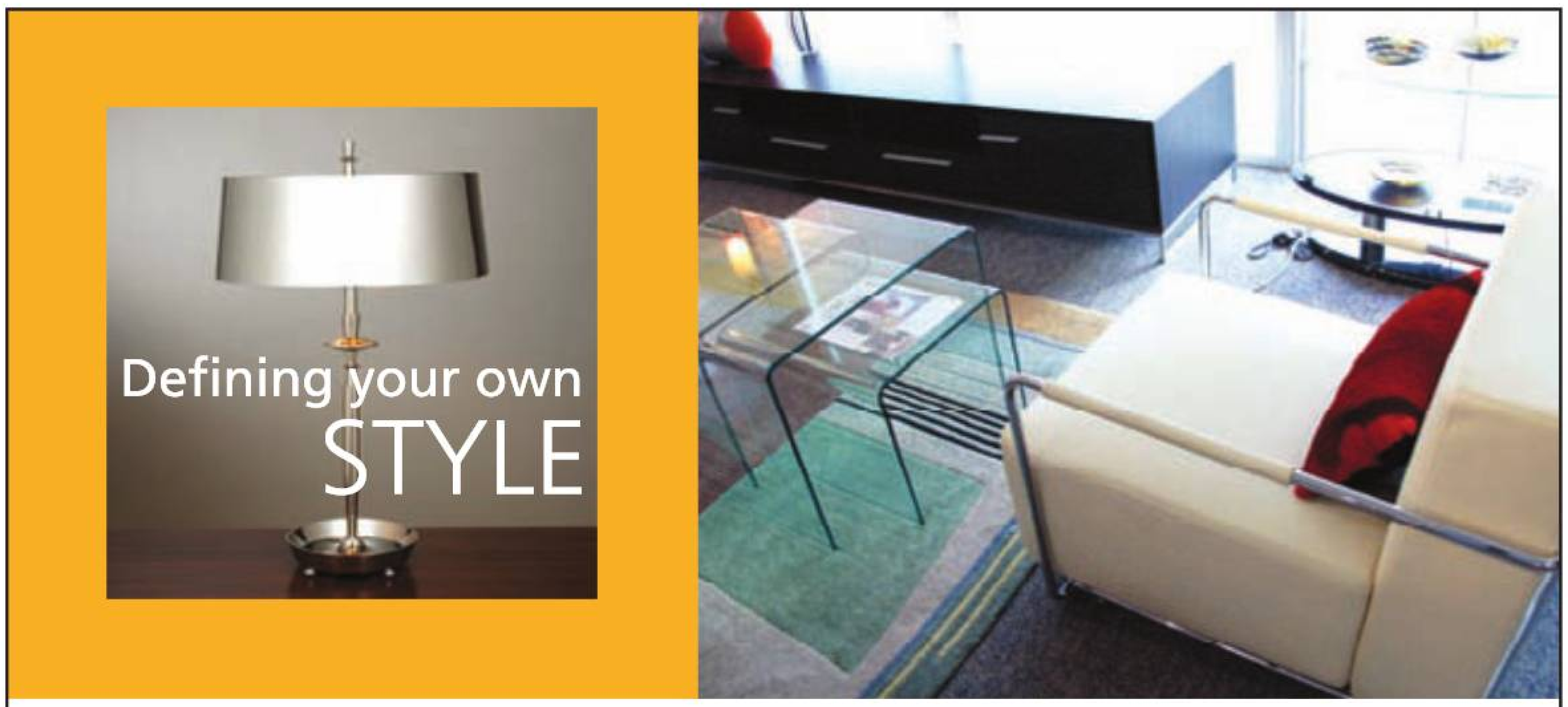

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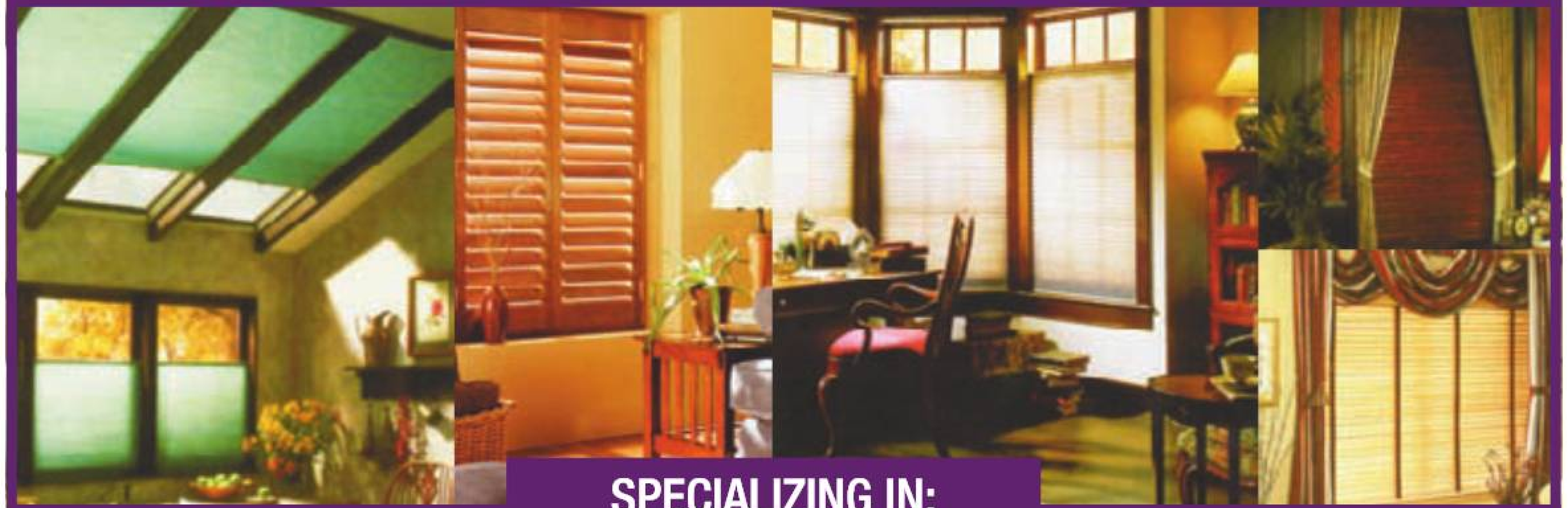

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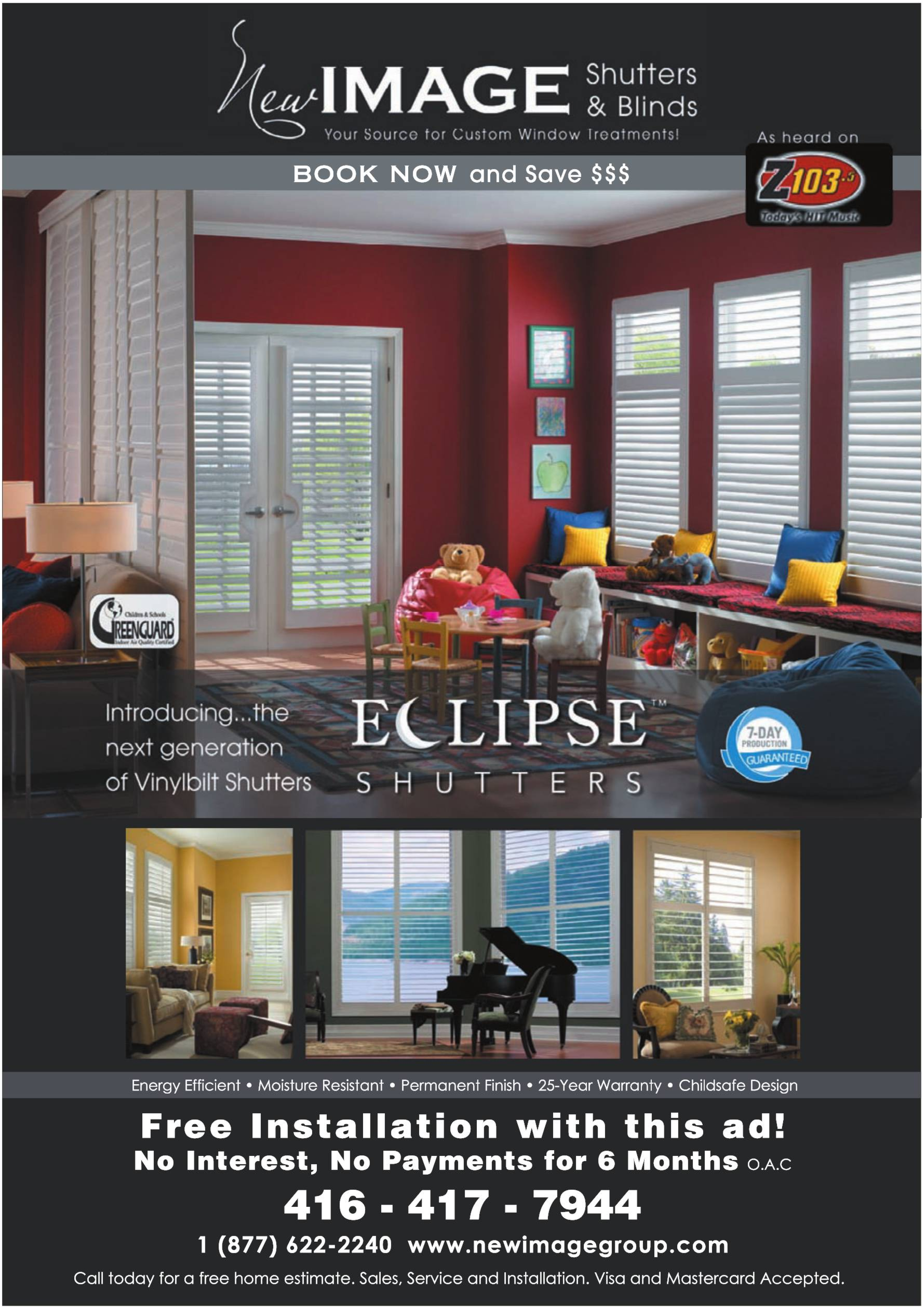
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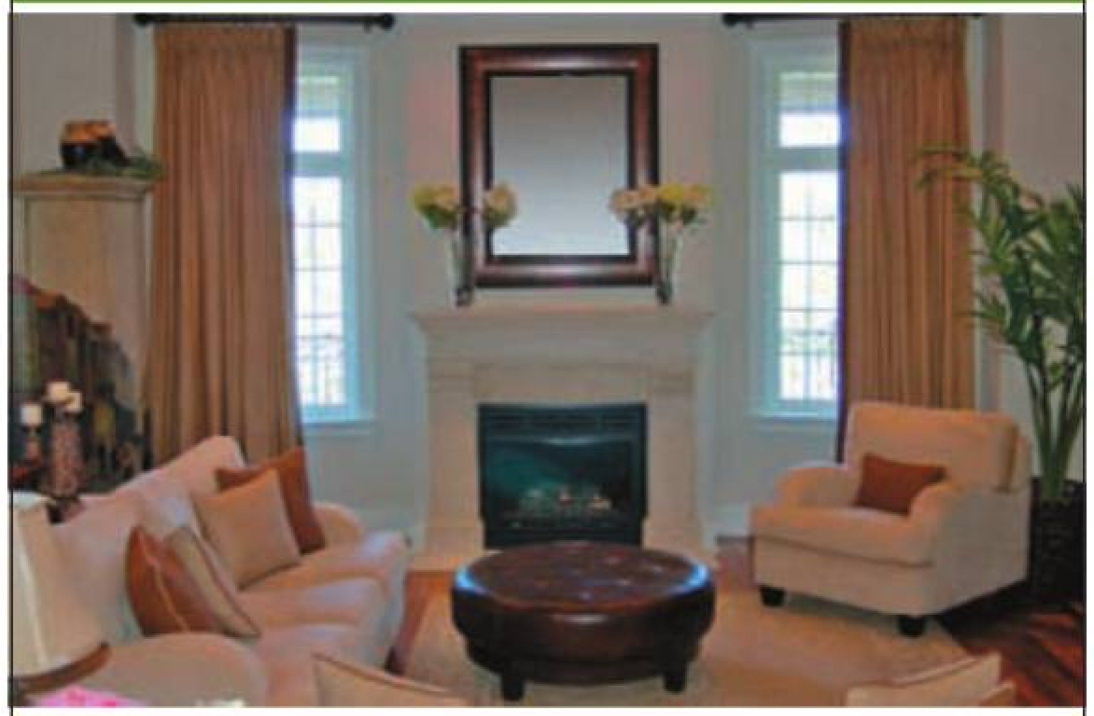

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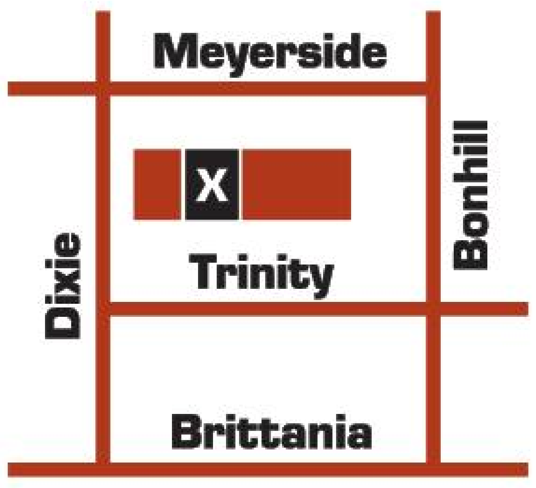

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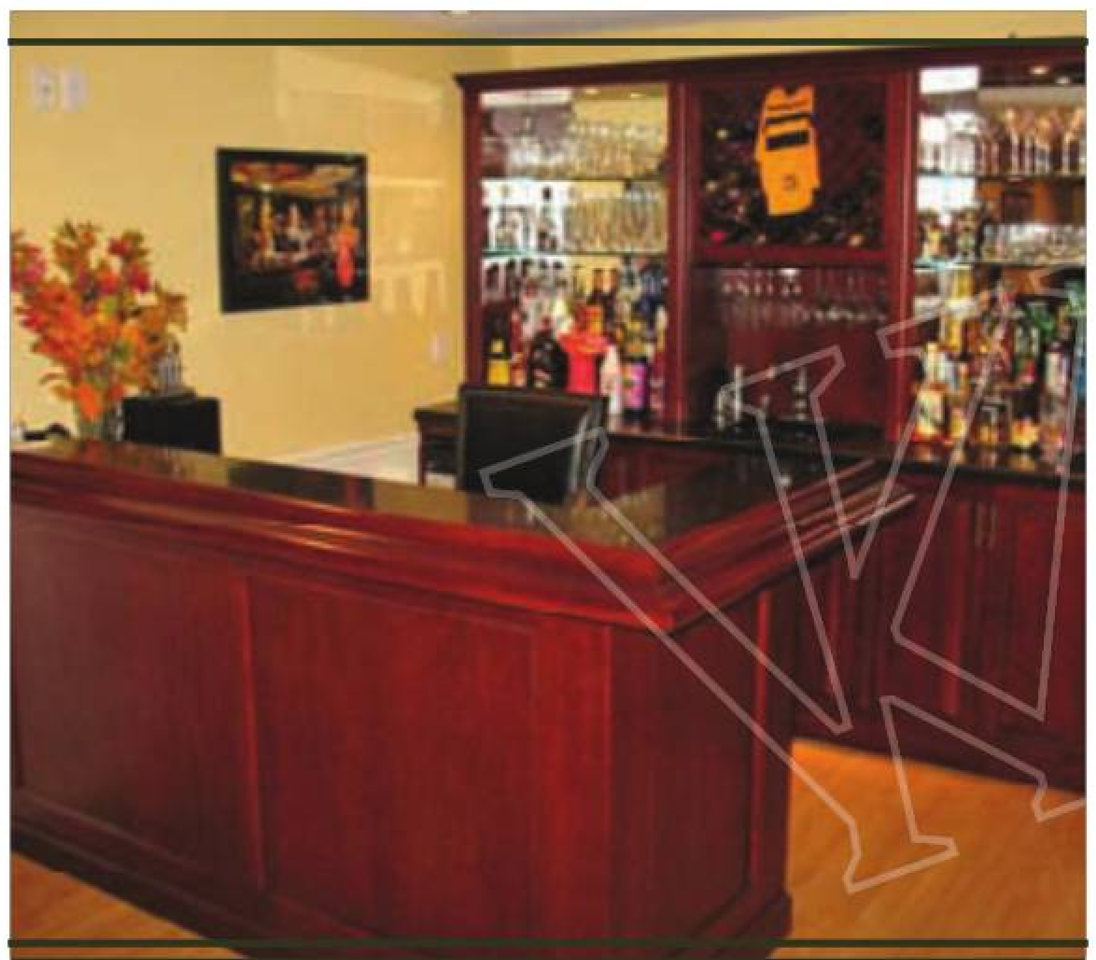

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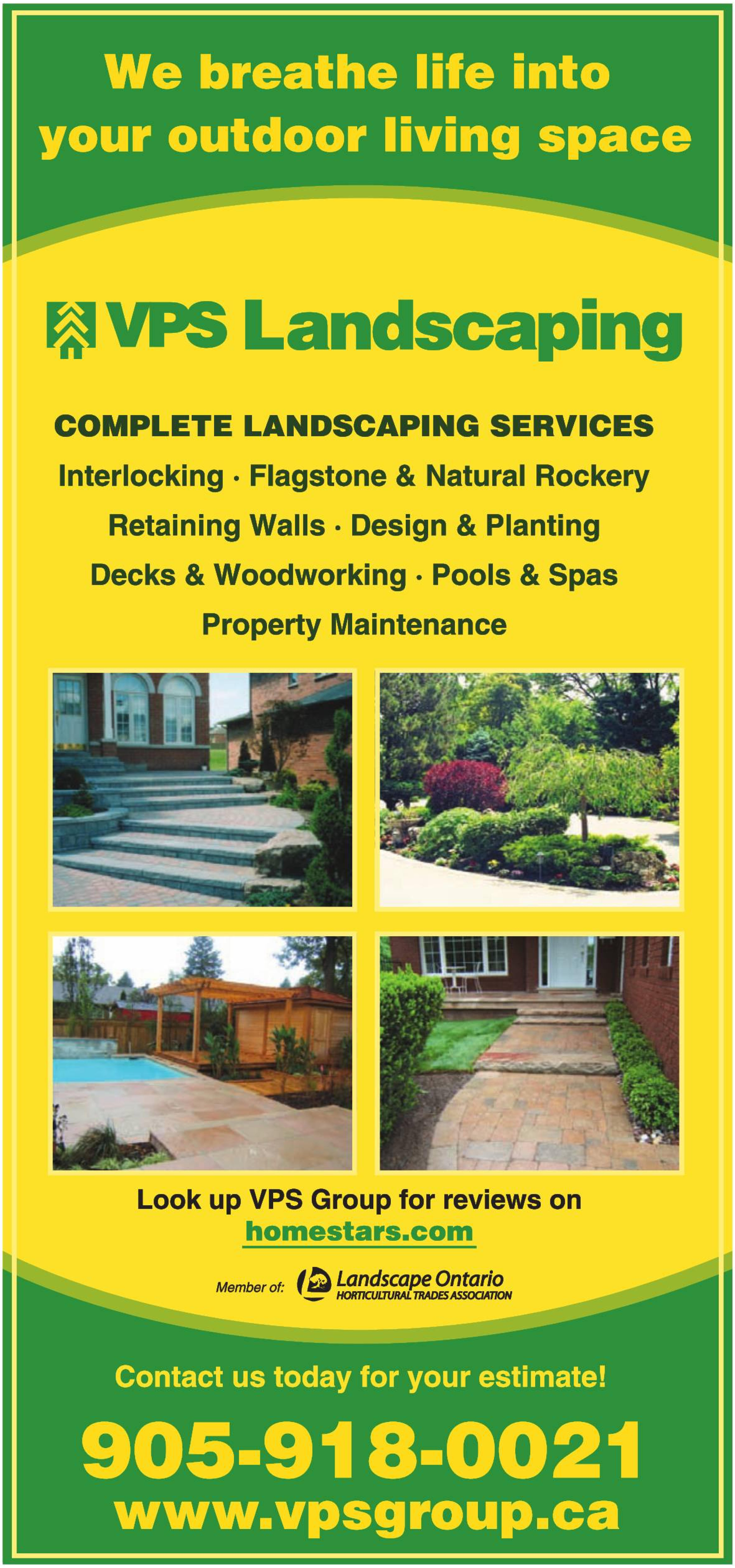

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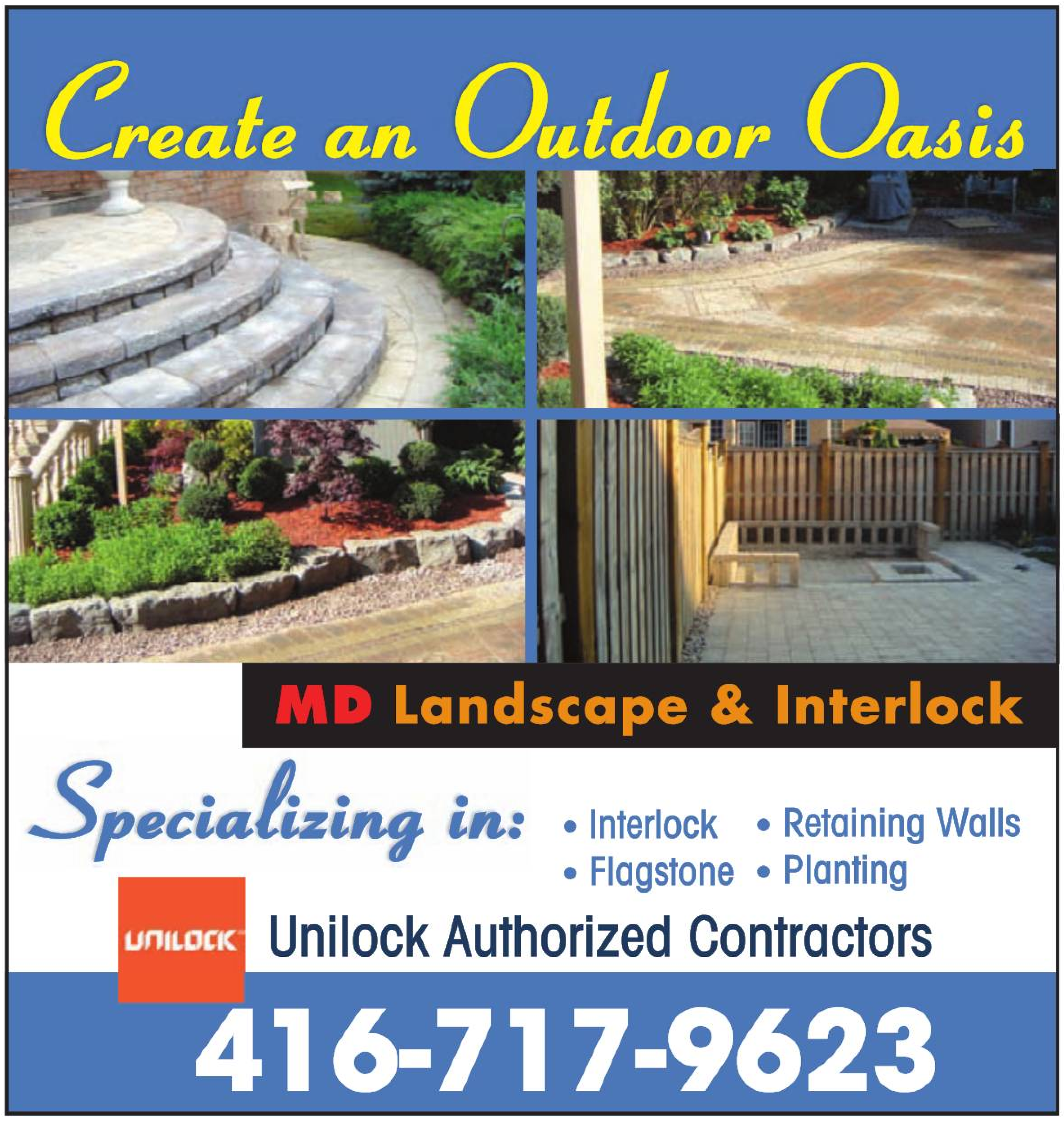
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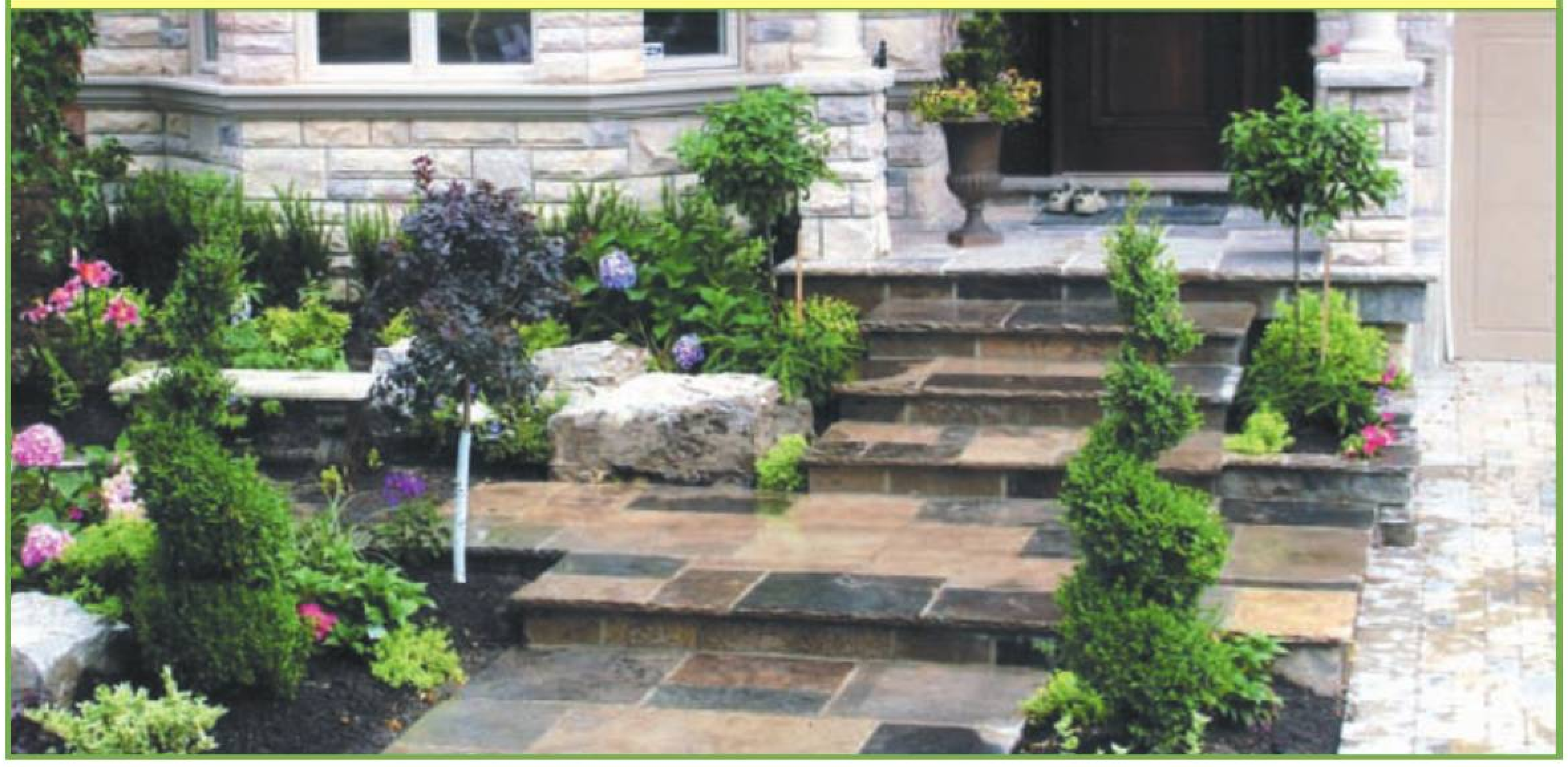

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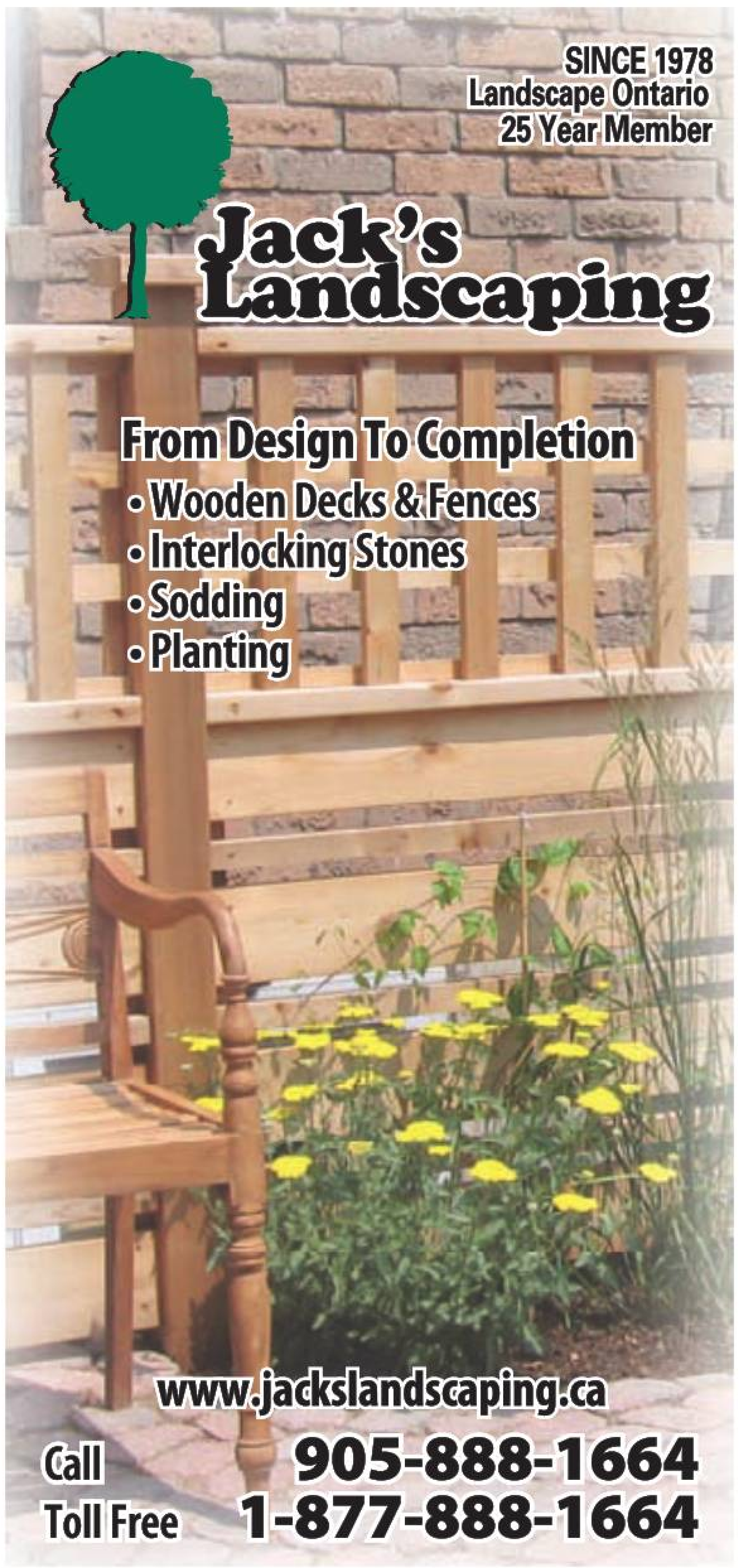
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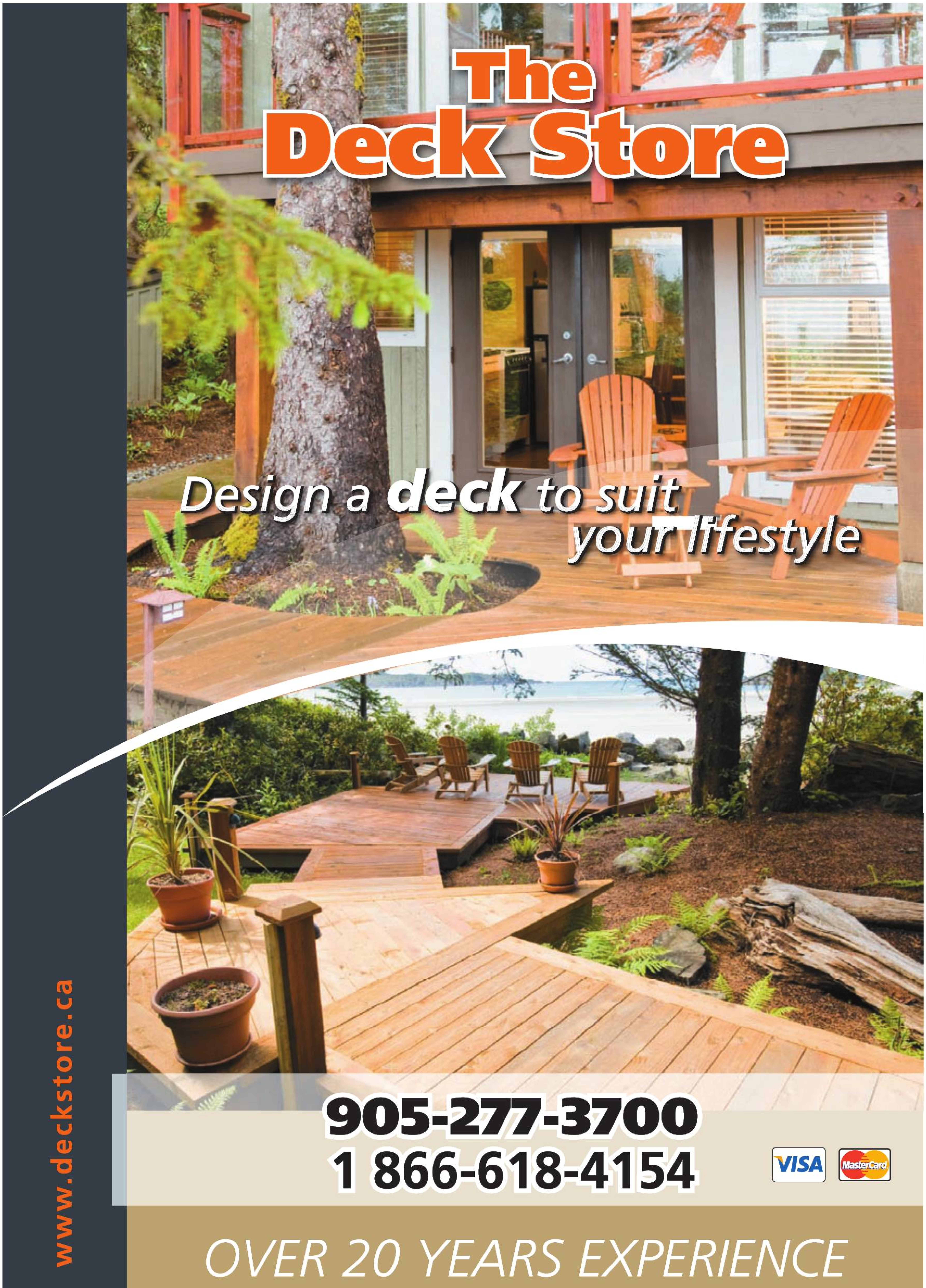
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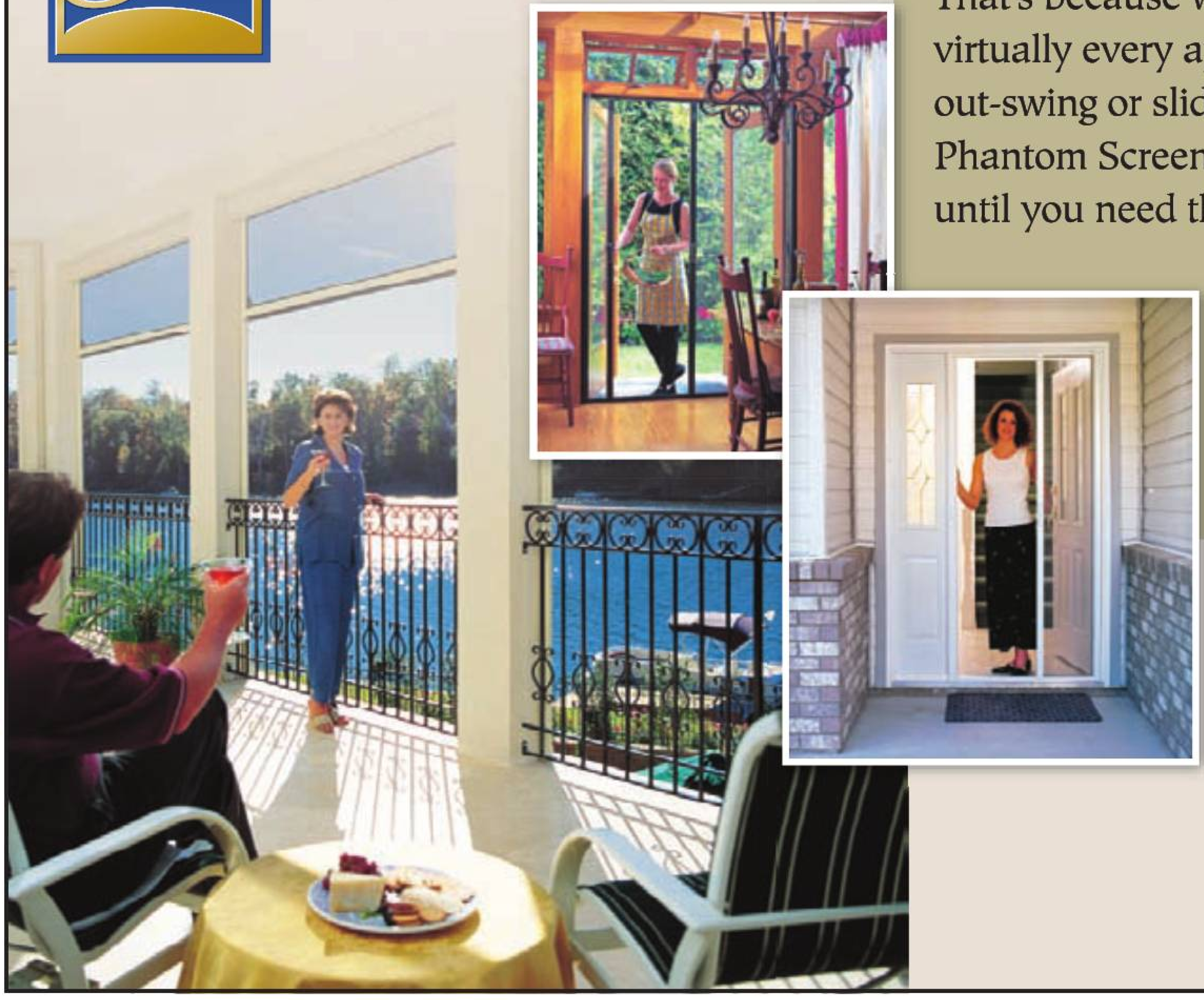

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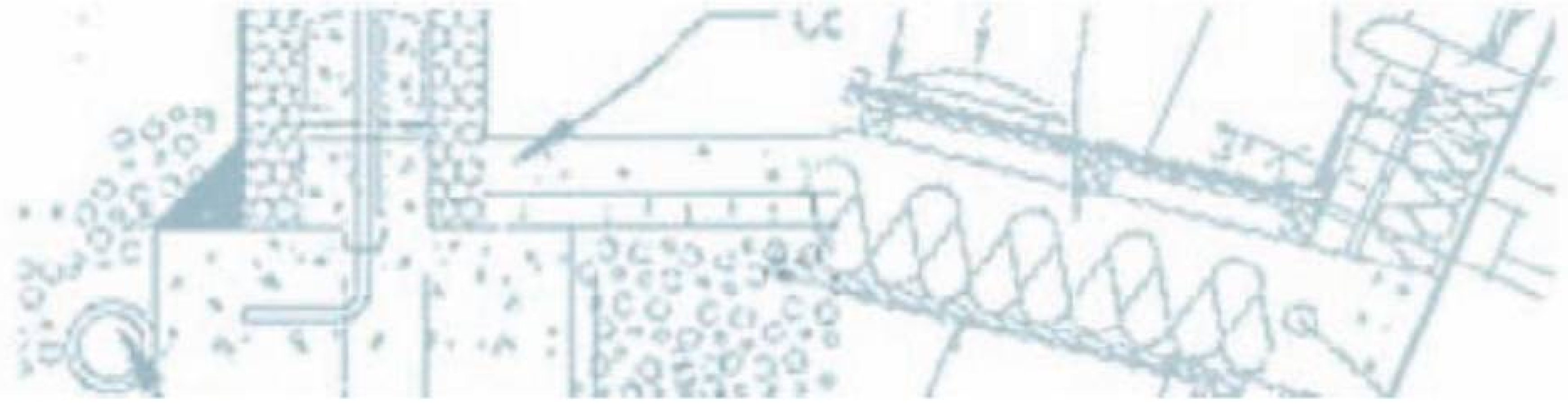

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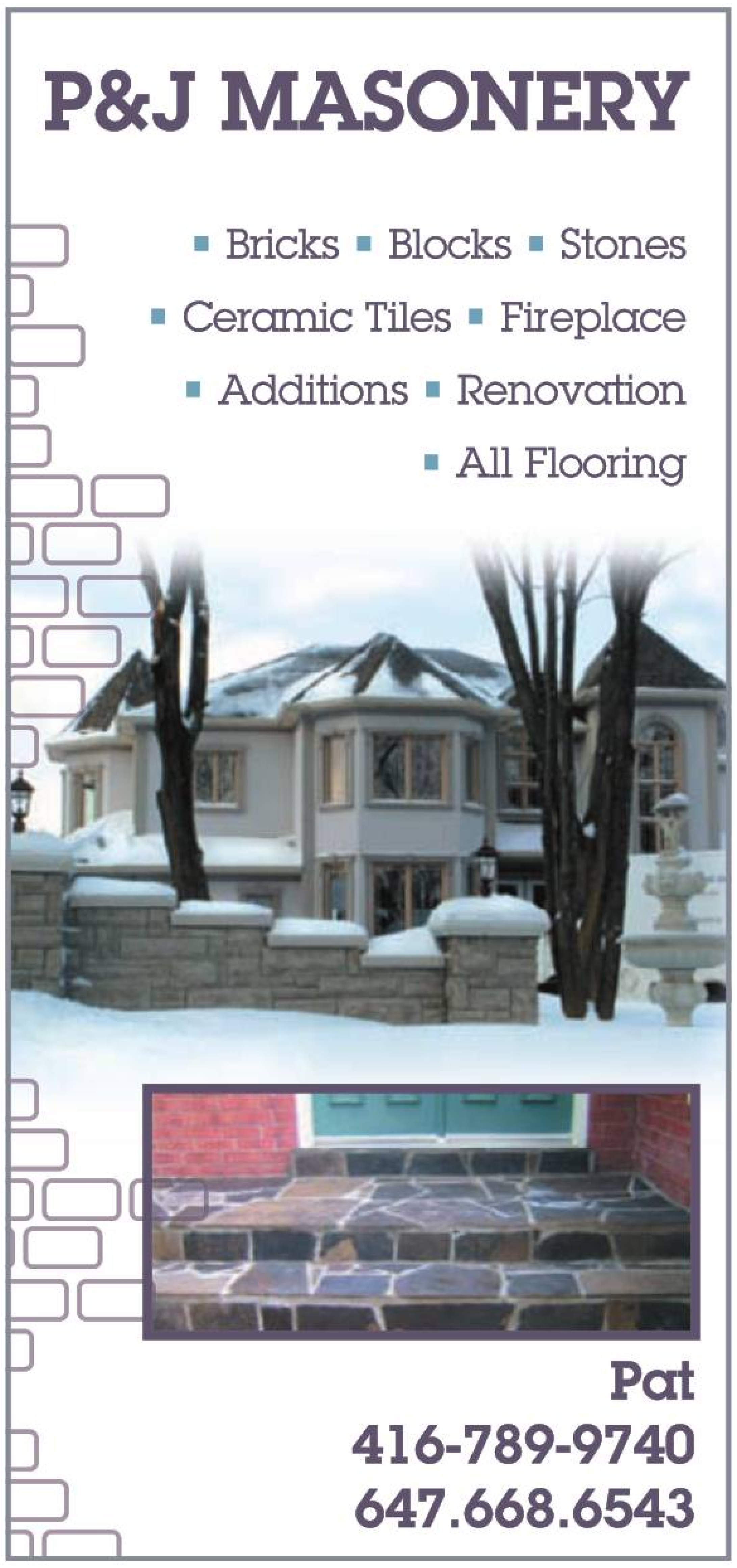
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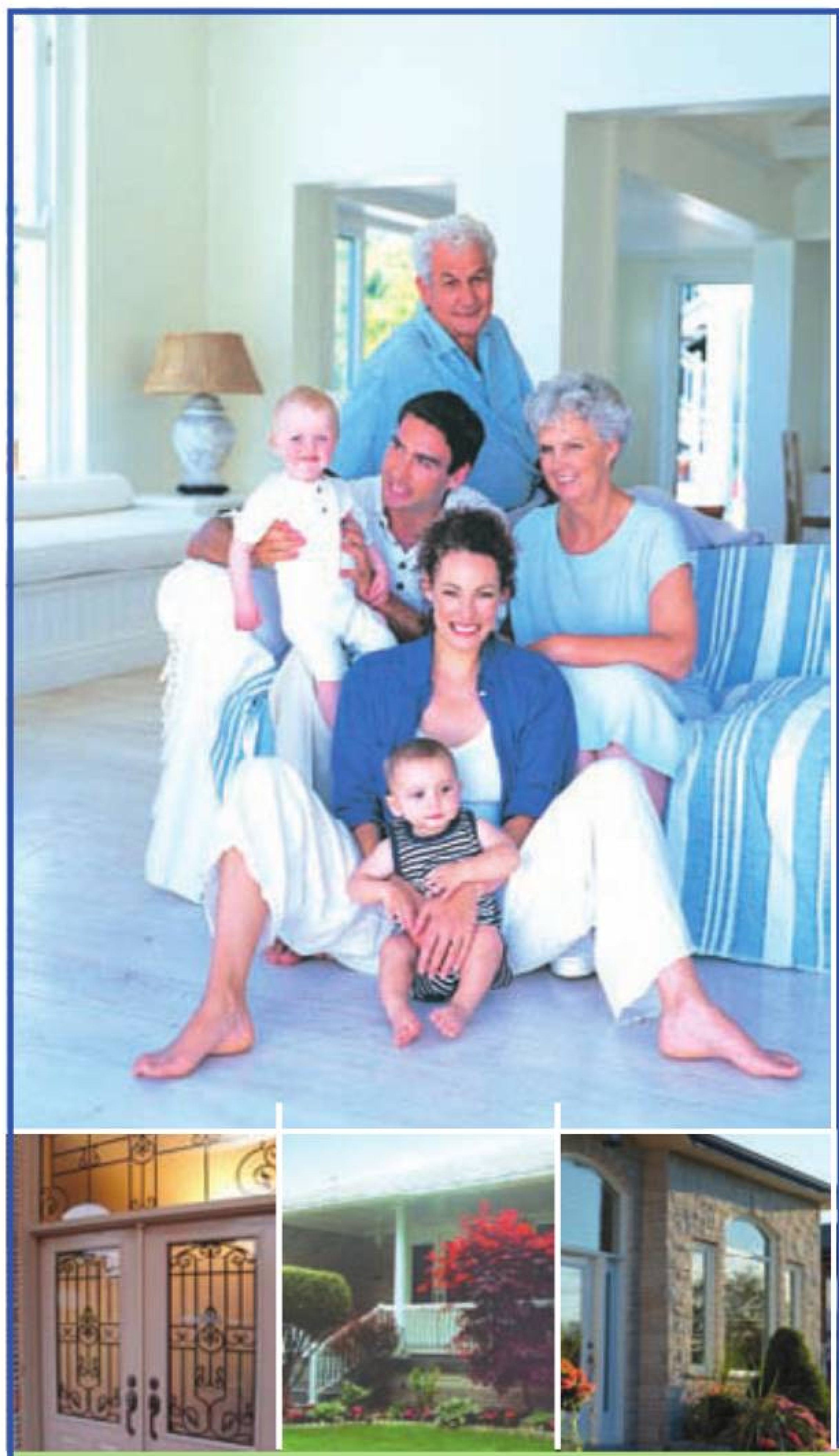

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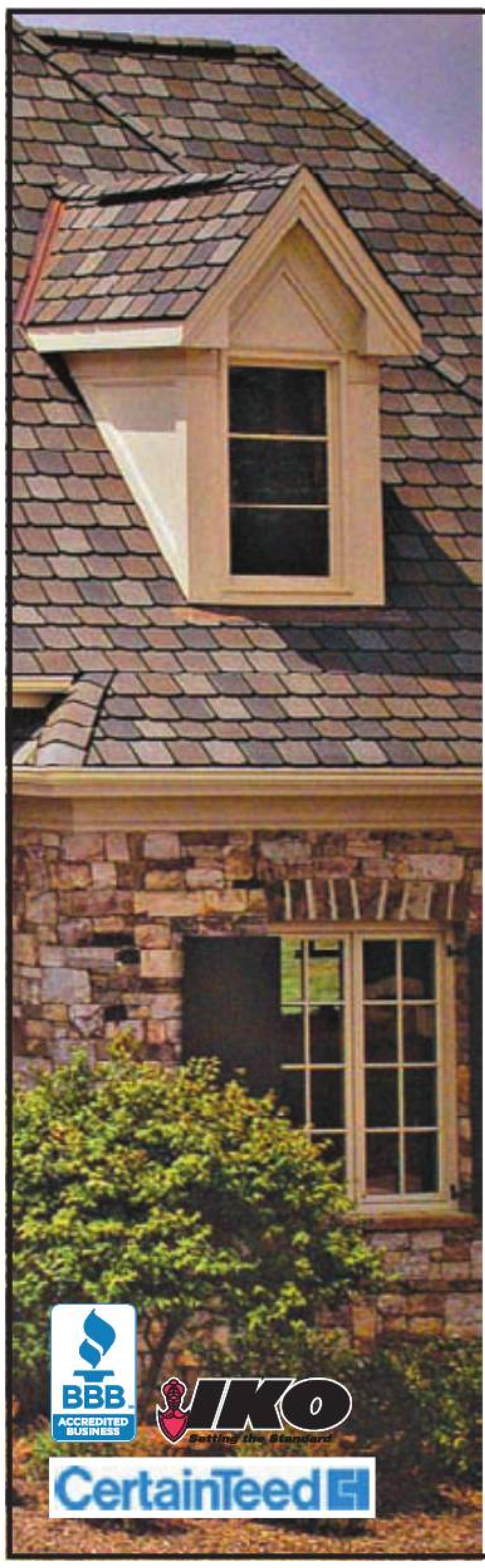

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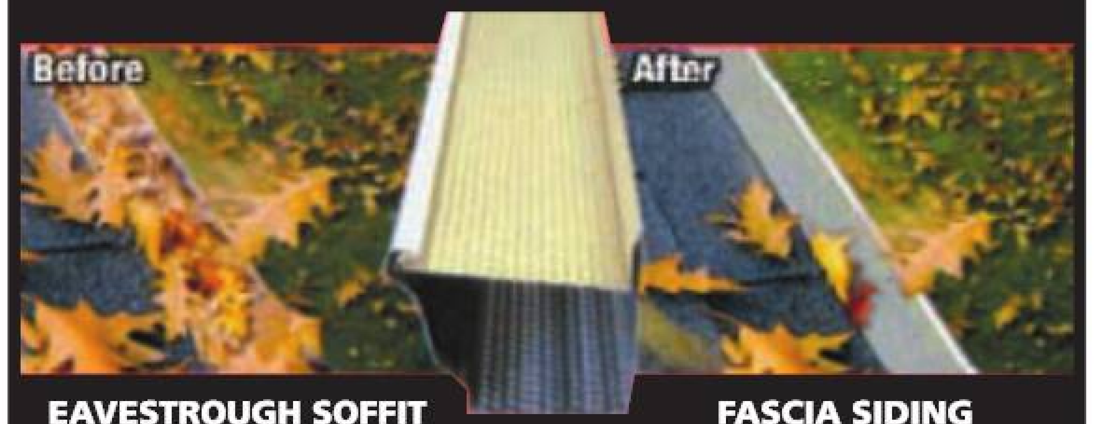

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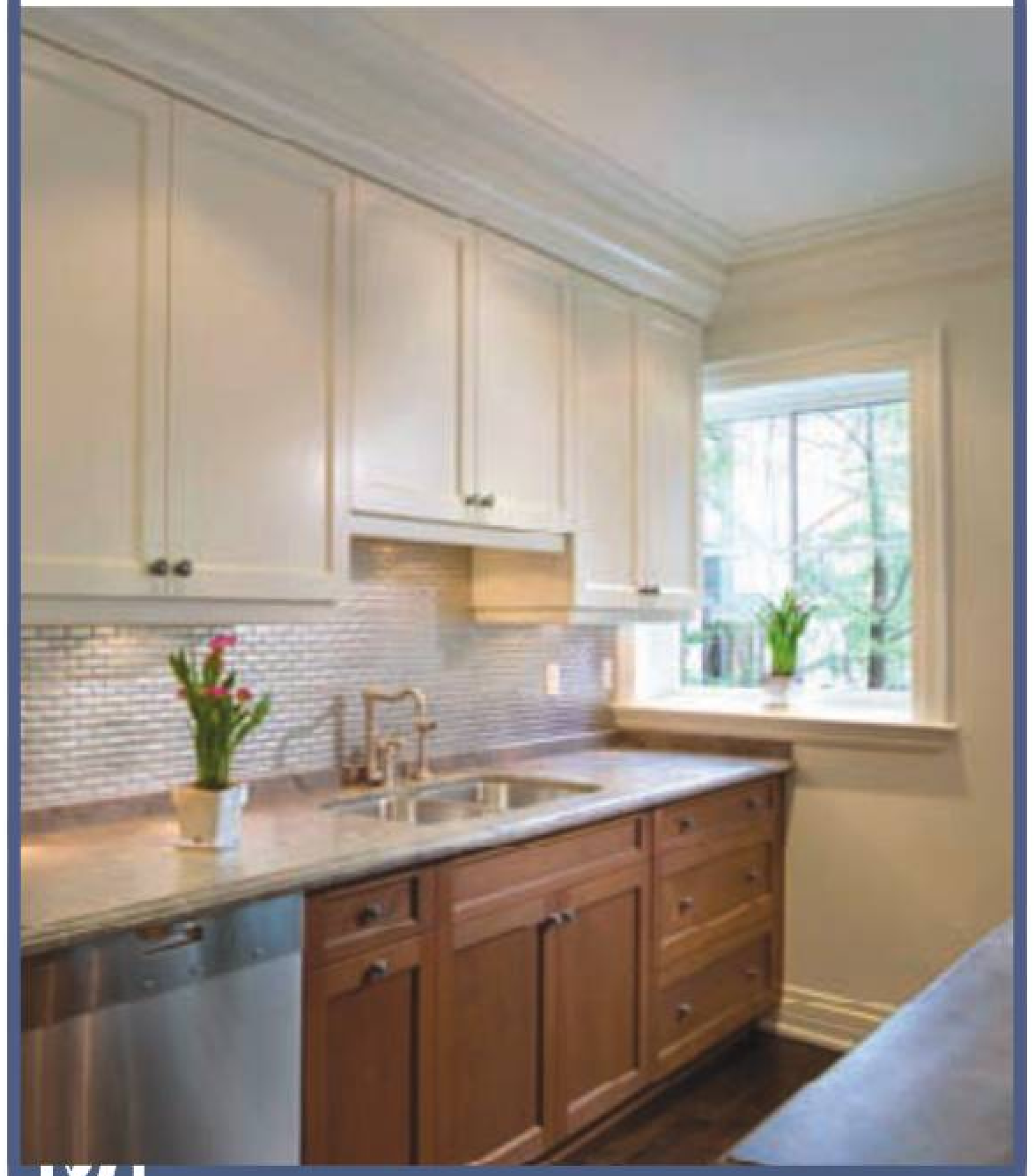

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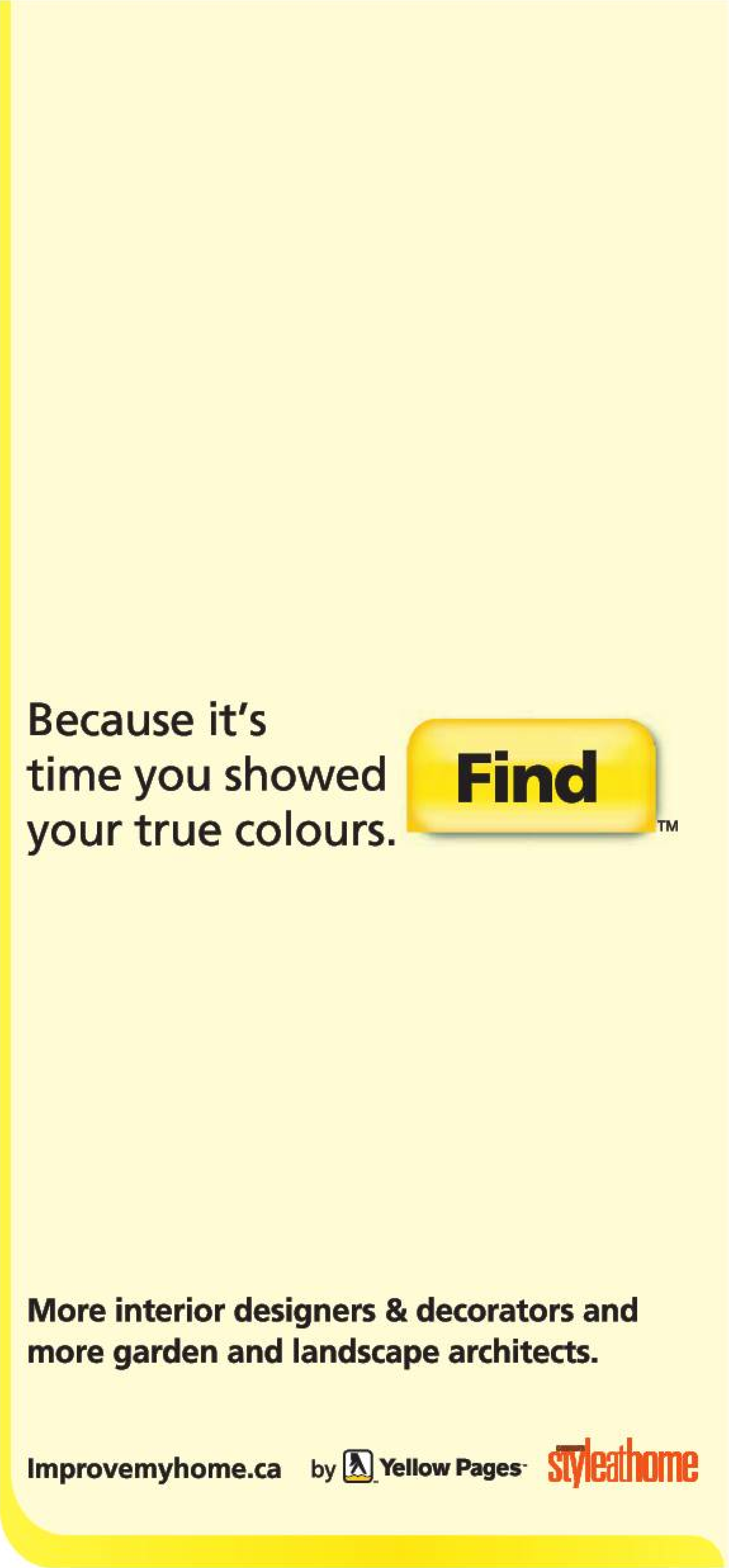
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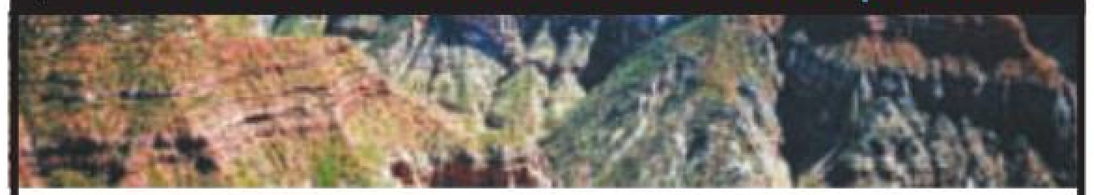

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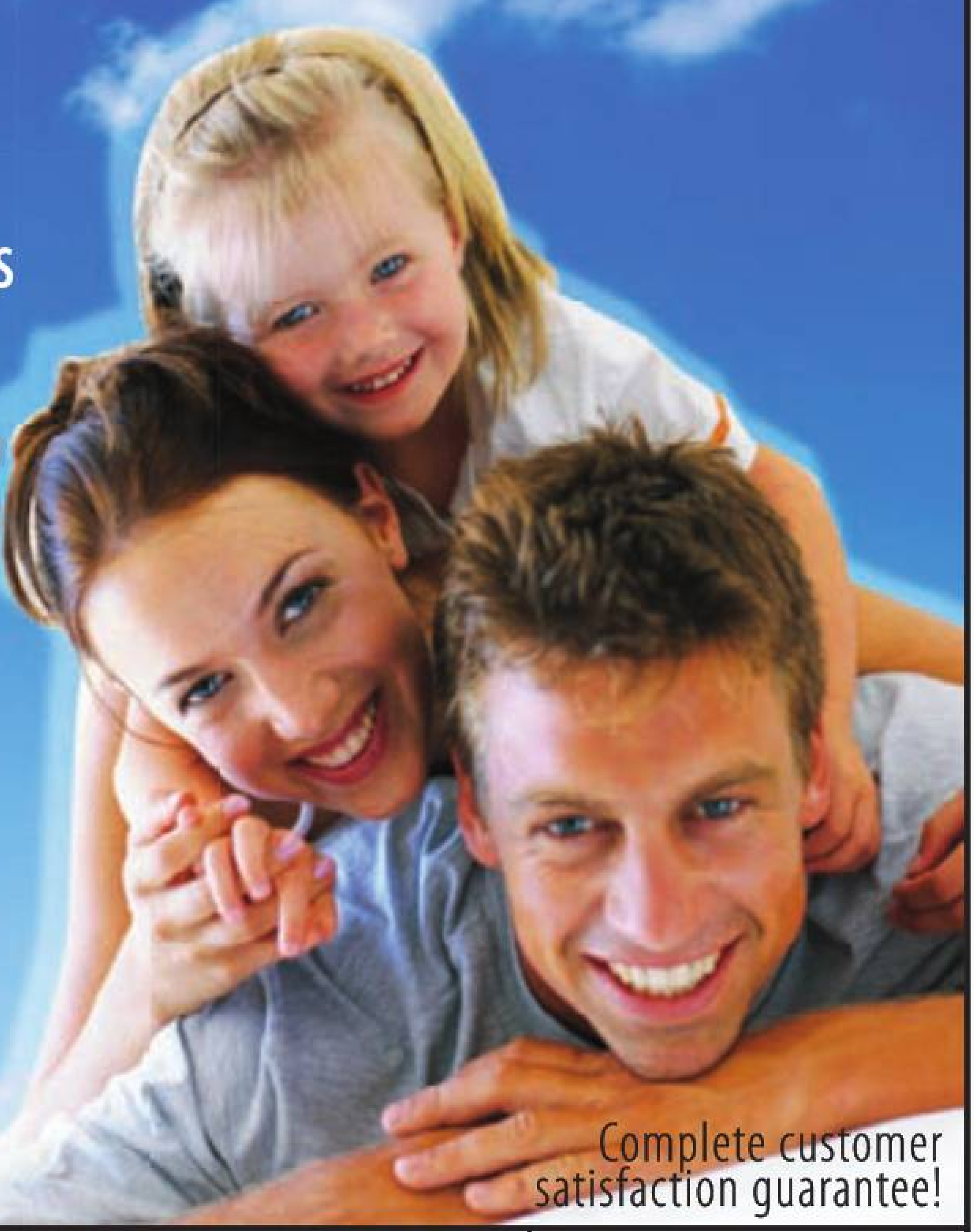

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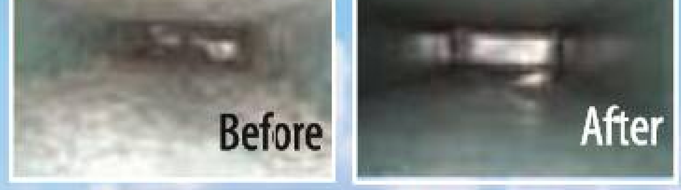

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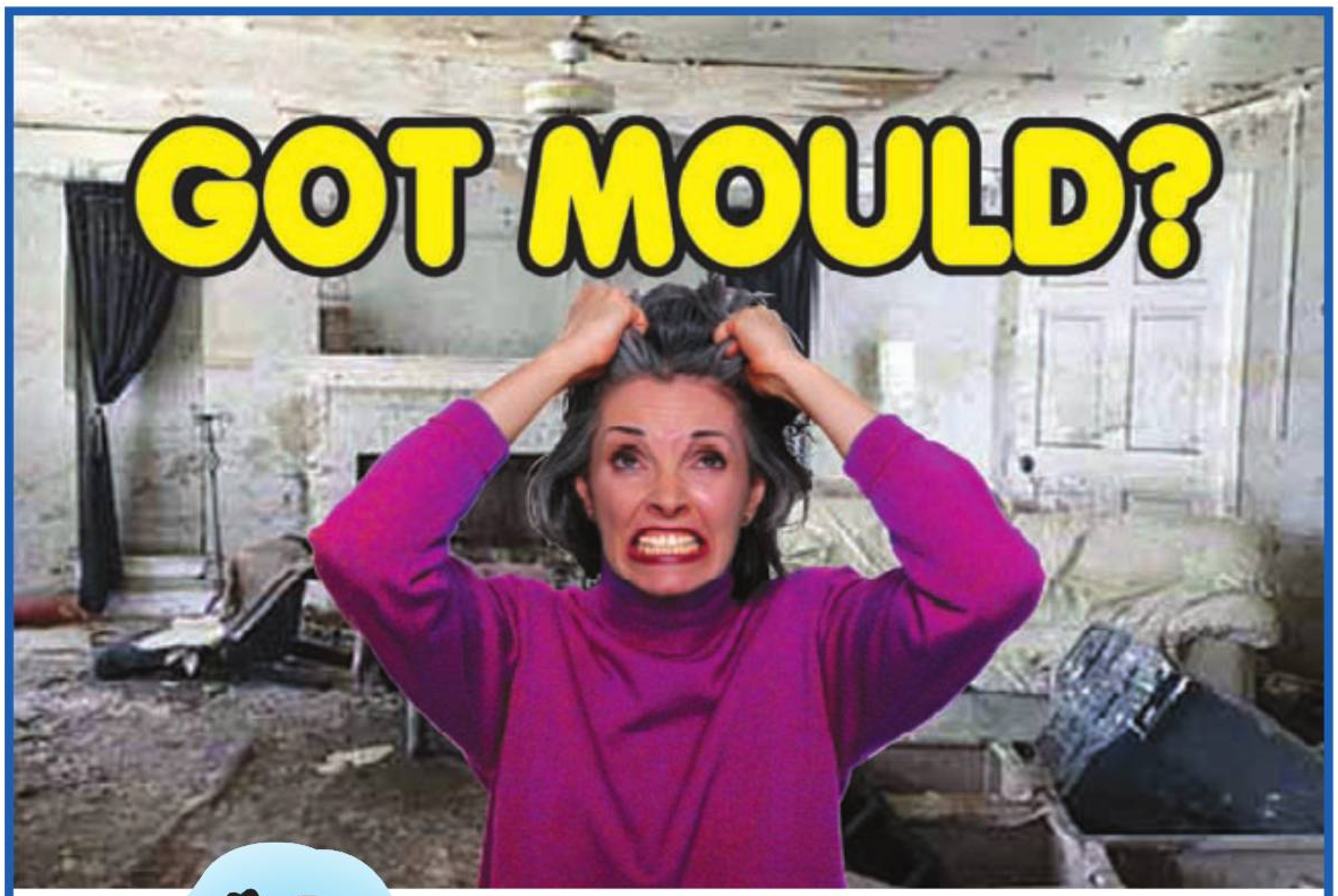

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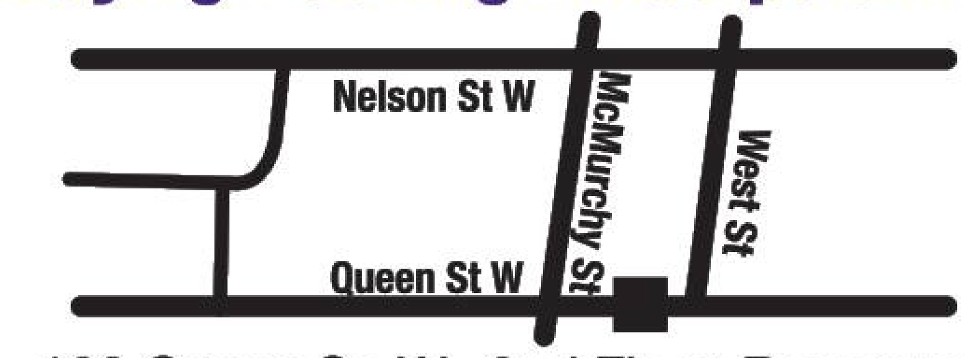

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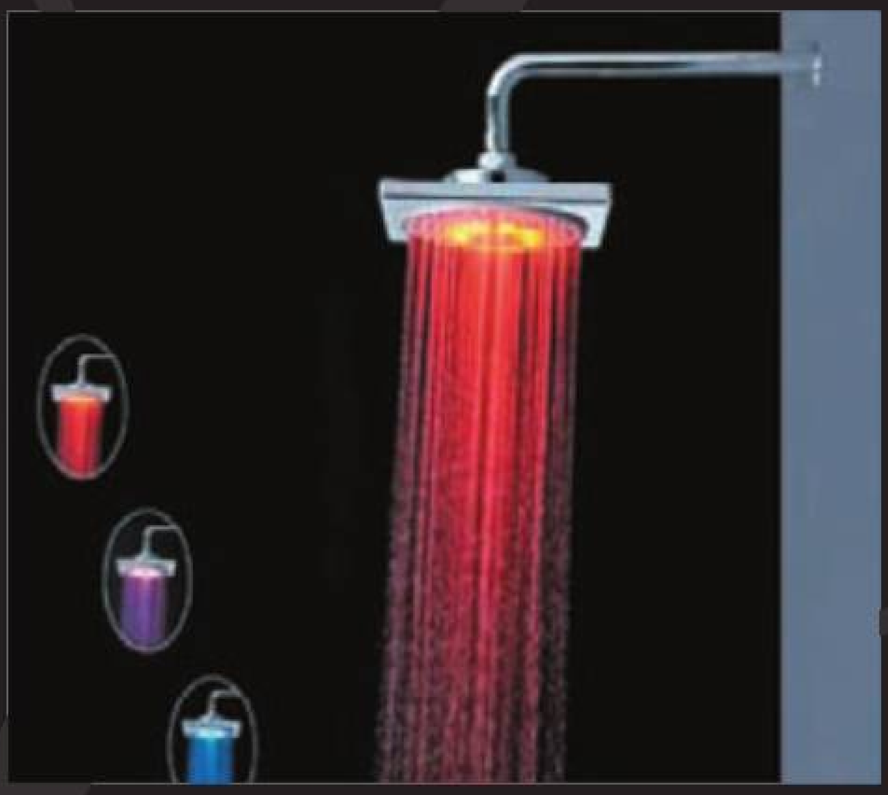

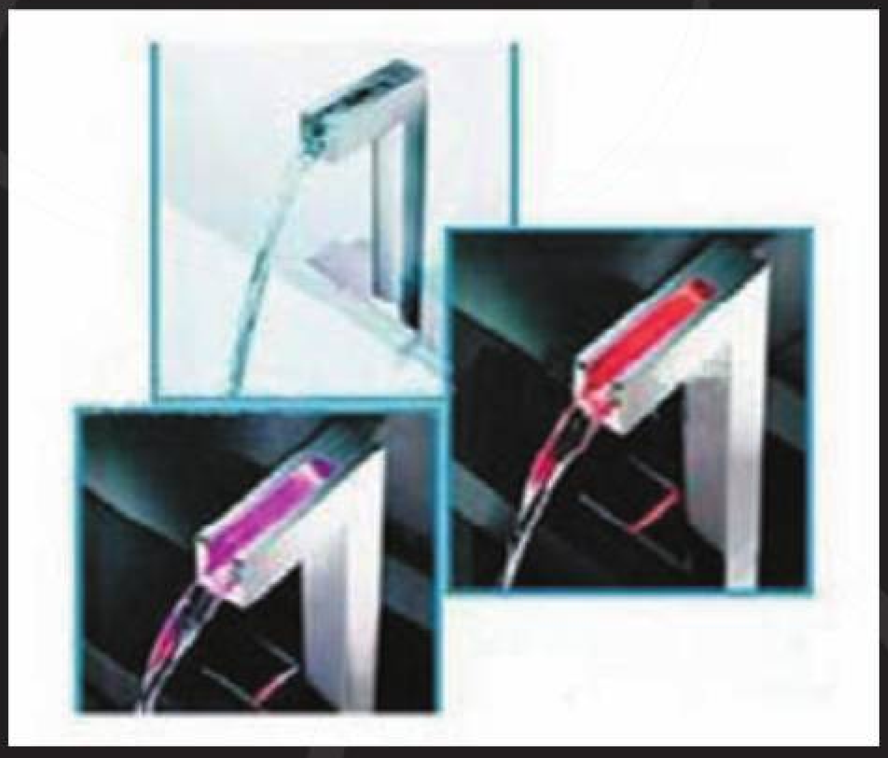

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